CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH RADICAL HUMANISM

A CO-OPERATIVE INQUIRY INTO CO-COUNSELLING AS A PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT METHOD

Dissertation submitted in part fulfilment of the requirement of the MSc (Health Education) Degree of the University of London

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The dissertation has 3 objectives. The first is to evaluate a specific therapeutic and developmental technology, co-counselling, using an experiential research model known as co-operative inquiry. The second is to reflect on the research process itself, and to look at the ways we think about knowledge and construct patterns of meaning. The third is to place the enterprise in the context of fundamental beliefs about health and health development, and to ask whether some such beliefs represent an evolutionary advance over others. Because of this multi-levelled approach, the present study is therefore a personal document rather than a collective one: it is not a report from the inquiry group on its findings.

The work draws heavily on my experience of the London Community of Co-Counselling International (CCI), in which I have been actively involved as a member and teacher for many years. It began with the formulation of an inquiry topic by me in consultation with my dissertation adviser – not by the inquiry group, which had not yet been recruited. The task was formulated as:

A co-operative inquiry into the benefits and limitations of co-counselling as a personal development method

C-counselling is essentially concerned with emotional and mental health and perceives them in dynamic, evolutionary terms. Health and well-being are located in an unfolding process of becoming human which has no known end point. In particular, the social norm is seen as a distressed and blinkered way of being, and the co-counselling network exists to support people in their efforts to transcend it. Hence the nature of the health belief in a sense displaces the word ‘health’ in favour of one such as growth and development. The inquiry question therefore is – to what extent does the co-counselling process succeed in being health promoting *in this sense?*

Having settled the inquiry topic, my next step was to contact a team of co-counsellors to form an inquiry group. The intention was to gather a group of 8 people, 4 women and 4 men, including myself. They would all be people who had at least two years experience of co-counselling in CCI (in London or elsewhere), who had each had some experience of teaching fundamentals (i.e. basic training courses) either in a lead or in a supporting role, or of leading workshops in this Community. All would be currently active in co-counselling or have been active for a significant period within the last 10 years. They should also have substantial experience of at least one other personal development method so as to have an external reference and point of comparison. During the recruitment process, each prospective member would know who else was likely to be involved, in case of any interpersonal difficulties that needed to be resolved in advance of the inquiry.

The first task of the participants, on agreeing to join the group, would be to respond to an open-ended questionnaire about their involvement in co-counselling. The second would be to study the full set of responses, collated, copied and circulated be me, to get to know more about each other's perspectives, to identify pertinent issues for the inquiry, and to offer specific suggestions for the inquiry programme. The final activity would be the inquiry itself, which would take place over a weekend, (with group building on the Friday evening and the substantive inquiry running between 10 a.m. and 5 pm. on the Saturday and Sunday).

15 people were contacted in September and October of 1992. At that time 8 agreed to take full part in the inquiry and another 4 to take part in the preliminary questionnaire and review of questionnaire responses. Although their experience varied widely, each of the participants (in both groups) met the established criteria for membership. The questionnaire and review process was completed in January 1993. The inquiry weekend took place on 5-7 February 1993. The location was the home of a participant which was also in regular use for co-counselling and other workshops. Some uncertainties and changes of plan meant that 4 women and 5 men took part in the group building and first session of the first day of the inquiry but that one of the men was not present on the Sunday. The work carried out on Saturday and Sunday was videotaped on a camcorder owned by one of the participants; this was transcribed by another participant over the period March/April 1993. The group generated, explored and reviewed 3 propositions relevant to the overall subject. Towards the end of the inquiry it was decided to spend follow-up time looking at the tapes or reviewing transcripts as a group.

The inquiry data are as follows: replies to questionnaires, notes offering suggestions for the inquiry programme, the complete set of videotapes and the written transcripts, and my own memory of the experience as a participant. Unfortunately the visual quality of much of the taped material is poor and there are only a few occasions where evidence from the visual record is used to contribute to this study. When speaking as author of the study, I refer to myself as “I”; when recording my own contributions as participant, I refer to myself as “James”.

The dissertation comprises 8 chapters. These reflect a mix of 5 research methodologies:

- an historical account of the development of co-counselling in the context of humanistic psychology
- an analysis of questionnaire responses
- co-operative inquiry using a quasi-experimental approach to its tasks
- co-operative inquiry using hermeneutic methods (intersubjective exchange among a community of concerned interpreters)
- disciplined reflection on my own experience

The first chapter provides a background to co-counselling, its historical development and working methods.

The second places CCI in the context of humanistic psychology and its characteristic ways of understanding human development both individually and collectively.

The third discusses experiential research, particularly co-operative inquiry, and explores some beliefs about the production of knowledge with particular emphasis on the idea of ‘critical subjectivity’. The essence of the research approach is explained as a form of reflexive inter-subjective exchange grounded in a set of shared practical experiences designed to counteract the danger of flight into abstraction and unsupported speculation.

The fourth chapter analyses the questionnaire responses, drawing out the beliefs of the respondents concerning the practice of co-counselling and the life of CCI.

The fifth chapter gives an account of the quasi-experimental investigation into ‘free attention’, the core listening skill practised in co-counselling process, that took place on the first day of the inquiry and offers suggestions about the value of the skill, its implications, and possible ways of varying or enhancing the benefits.

The sixth chapter concerns the exploration of ‘discharge’, the form of intensive stress release which co-counselling clients use as their predominant therapeutic tool. This part of the inquiry took place on the second day and was more hermeneutic in methodology. It makes distinctions within the concept ‘discharge’ and concludes that there are potential benefits and limitations within the process. Also looked at are the idea that the characteristic personality construct in present-day Western society (referred to as ‘egoic’) is fundamentally distressed, and the possible role of meditation as a contrasting or complementary practice vis-à-vis counselling in overcoming such distress.

The seventh chapter reviews the question of validity in the research and discusses models of validity used in co-operative inquiry, the evolution of the group’s thinking and practice during the February inquiry, and the validation of the present research as a whole in the light of six specific criteria.

The last chapter draws seven tentative conclusions about the inquiry topic, ‘the benefits and limitations of co-counselling as a personal development method’, and offers some final thoughts about the underlying structure of the health beliefs on which co-counselling is seen to be based.

A bibliography is attached to then end of the dissertation. Other documents connected to the inquiry, including transcripts, are available in paper form.

CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND TO CO-COUNSELLING

Genesis

"Re-evaluation Counseling started as an accident. In a particular situation I was motivated to help a particular person who was in a state of mental and emotional collapse and apparently helplessly lost. He happened to be so balanced that my fumbling efforts to do all the wrong things allowed him to do all the right things. He made such a dramatic recovery that I couldn't leave the revealed possibilities alone. A friend of mine and I set out to explore the listening and allowing discharge process to see if it could work for other people also. We fumbled a little at first, but it worked. Enough dramatic changes occurred to each of us so we kept it going. Then I tried to take the discovery to some professionals to get them to use it. They couldn't hear me or take me seriously at all. I was left with the alternative of digging out and discovering the theory and practice of RC if I wanted the use of it myself. Later I met some of you and then I met the rest of you. By a whole series of occurrences this great movement called RC came into being" (Jackins, 1976, 40).

The myth of the origin of co-counselling, as recounted by its founder to a large audience of committed co-counsellors, seems simple enough. In fact it is packed with information both about the process itself and its perceived relationship to the world. The process is based on "listening and allowing discharge" and allows its beneficiary "a dramatic recovery" from "a state of mental and emotional collapse". However, whilst the person at first appears to be "helplessly lost", it is also stated that he was "so balanced" that he was able to respond effectively even to a muddled and inexpert version of what was eventually to become the co-counselling way of intervention. The emphasis is on the subject's ability to access a healing resource and work with it despite the mistakes and incomprehension of the helper.

Secondly, we are asked to see co-counselling emerging *sui generis* from a single key experience – indeed as a set of "revealed" possibilities. Harvey Jackins is himself a Marxist and the revelation is presented as emerging through a practical human encounter, but he grew up in a strongly Protestant mid-Western farming community and

I don't think that the theological resonances of a word like revealed can be ignored. Indeed, the subsequent testing of the revelation together with a friend, only to have it spurned by the twentieth century priesthood of psychology and psychotherapy, has an almost biblical ring. So, of course, does the final phase of trusting to inner resources – "digging out … the theory and practice" and building up "this great movement". It is also interesting to note that the newly discovered technology is immediately framed as something of benefit to everybody, including the discoverer, and not as a specialist resource for people in difficulties. This may well have been helped by the somewhat evangelical, rather than helping-professional, origins of the practice of co-counselling.

The heart of the matter

Co-counselling, conceived as a movement, has two aspects. One is its therapeutic method, developed so as to be used within a reciprocal peer relationship. The other is the creation of an organisation or network or community within which such relationships may best flourish.

A basic account of the therapeutic method, aimed at people thinking about learning it, runs as follows:

"People work in pairs taking half of each times session to be client and half to be counsellor with each partner. As *clients* on a course you are first invited to value yourselves and discover your good qualities. Then you are taught specific techniques to work on problems: things that upset you, times when you do less well than expected or relationships that you find difficult. By releasing your stored up feelings you gain insight into your needs and attitudes and this frees you to become more intelligent and creative and loving …

"As *counsellors,* you learn how to give full attention and not feel overcome by your partner's difficulties. You are shown how to help clients express themselves more fully without interrupting, intruding or taking over. As *counsellors,* you do not give advice: you are there to share, care and provide a safe situation in which your client can work" (Nichol & Wilks, 1991).

The emphasis, then, is on contacting stored up feelings of distress and releasing them – the co-counselling jargon for the achieved release is 'discharge'. The listening is of a kind intended to generate safety and draw out the discharge rather than engage with the process interactively, which is why Jackins talks about the 'listening and allowing discharge process'. This is the essence of the co-counselling method.

The added reference in the above quotation to initial work around feelings of self-worth also derives from something hinted at by Jackins, when he talks about his first client being 'so balanced' that he was able to respond. As co-counselling developed, its practitioners realised that people need some core of self-belief in order to make the method work. When in the process of discharge, it is important that the client is not wholly identified with the distress which they are contacting and releasing. They also have somehow to see through and beyond it. This capacity is referred to as the client's 'balance of attention'. This is the dual requirement to have some attention on their distress, enabling them to re-experience it, and some outside the distress either within the persona of an internal counsellor, or externally focused on the counsellor who is providing attention, so as to have a resource for working on the distress and thus discharging it.

Development

Harvey Jackins began the work at the beginning of the 1950's and by 1952 he had established an agency – Personal Counselors – in Seattle, Washington. Teaching in ongoing classes involved reciprocal counselling and in 1965 a theoretical framework for the process was offered in the pages of *The human side of human beings* (Jackins, 1965). This focused on the idea of catharsis as a process which resets the body after negative emotional arousal through actions like laughing and crying, raging shaking, yawning. The book specified conditions for encouraging catharsis ('discharge') as an emotive re-experiencing of past distresses with a simultaneous awareness that such distresses did not arise from the present-time situation. "Mere expression of negative feelings is thus not cathartic", as Rose Evison and Richard Horobin point out in their own gloss on Jackins' thesis (Evison & Horobin in Rowan & Dryden, eds. 1988, 86).

By 1970 Re-evaluation Counseling (RC) had taken on something like its present form. (The name arose in recognition of the spontaneous re-evaluation of problems, compulsive maladaptive behaviour patters or life situations often reported by clients in the aftermath of discharge.) By the late 1980's there were groups of co-counsellors in more than 30 countries, including a thriving network in the UK.

Exodus

RC is still led and organised from Seattle. It has a printing house, *Rational Island Publishers*, from which it distributes a variety of books and a magazine, *Present Time,* available to the public as well as the membership. It has a clear chain of command, essentially a softened version of the Leninist model of democratic centralism, with an emphasis on consistency of theory and practice. Consequently, although RC does change and evolve, this is done in a highly deliberate and controlled way. Not surprisingly, it has proved to have a short way with dissenters.

RC arrived in Great Britain in 1970 and John Heron, then Director of the Human Potential Research Project, taught the first indigenous class in 1971. During the years that followed, relations with Harvey Jackins became strained and Heron left RC early in 1974. At about the same time a number of other people, including a handful of teachers, left or were excluded in Britain and the United States. Some of these people established co-counselling groups outside the RC organisation, initially in New England and Britain. In 1975 a network of these groups, called Co-Counselling International (CCI) was set up, with an international committee and guidelines for CCI communities. However, as part of the reaction to the perceived authoritarianism of RC, local groups within CCI are self-determining and there is no coherent overall organisation. The London Community to which I and most of the inquiry members belong is not answerable to anybody else in CCI.

Theory and development in CCI

CCI has no formal leadership, no administrative structure, and no publishing house. However at the time of the split John Heron, its main theoretician, had an academic base at the University of Surrey and was shortly to acquire a second one with the British

Postgraduate Medical Federation at the University of London. During the course of the 1970's and early 1980's he set out his own distinctive positions in a series of pamphlets under the imprint of these institutions which rapidly acquired an informal canonical status within CCI. (Because of its repudiation of structure, CCI has no way either of regularising this position or of challenging it.)

The key positions are summarised most succinctly in one of the later publications, *Education and the affect* (Heron, 1982). Here he says:

"Persons have certain distinctively <u>human capacities</u> that are … irreducible to physiological drives, instincts, or other somatic impulses. Three of these that I regard as central are: the capacity to love (and be loved), to understand (and be understood), to choose (and be chosen) … The interference with, blocking and frustration of, these capacities generates certain basic distress feelings. Such feelings, at their point of origin, I regard as entirely healthy, valid responses to the thwarting of human development, of the emergence of a person from a potential to an actual state … " (Heron, 1982, 1).

While conceding that some degree of grief, fear and anger may be seen as an enabling shock or spur, Heron sees the more extreme degrees, especially those occurring at the beginning of life and systematically recurring thereafter, as disabling. He contends that the behaviour of most people in our society shows evidence of "a good deal of disabling distress. Much of this becomes rigidified in social and institutional norms, and so becomes apparently invisible – because it is accepted as normal behaviour" (Heron, 1982, 2). Heron makes an important distinction between 'distress feelings' and 'distorted feelings'. Distress feelings are the originally healthy responses of grief, fear and anger to the interruption of human development. Distorted feelings are what develop when distress feelings are repressed and denied healing. "The grief, fear and anger congeal into feelings of alienation, withdrawal, self-pity, dependency, claiming, clinging, demanding, neediness: of self-righteousness, of dogmatic certitude, propitiation, superstition, insecurity, anxiety, self-doubt; of despair, apathy, powerlessness, depression, self-denigration, self-destruction, destructive rage, malicious hate, jealousy; and so on" (Heron, 1982, 3). It is this baggage of distorted affect that makes us less than we might be.

Two ways of dealing with distorted feelings are recommended in the pamphlet – ‘catharsis’ and ‘transmutation’. In his remarks on catharsis, Heron reiterates the basic co-counselling pre-supposition that “distress feelings of grief, fear and anger, when they choke and disable the healthy, flexible exercise of basic capacities, can be resolved by the process of catharsis, of emotional discharge” (Heron, 1982, 3). He further specifies that grief discharges in tears and sobbing, fear in trembling and cold perspiration, anger in (harmless) high frequency movements of the limbs and loud sound. For the full experience of discharge, these behaviours need to be accompanied by a fully conscious and accepted experience of the distressed feelings themselves. An activity like co-counselling, therefore, is a mechanism for unpicking distorted feelings in order to get at the underlying distress feelings and releasing them. The result is a restructuring of awareness which gives scope for the re-emergence of flexible human response.

Heron breaks new ground, in co-counselling terms, when he talks about transmutation. Complementary to catharsis, this process is one in which “a shift in consciousness takes place through the exercise of mental aspiration of choice” (Heron, 1982, 4). However, this is not to be seen as a simple cognitive re-adjustment or form of aware control, since Heron’s whole thesis is that distorted feelings are not resolved, though they may be contained, by control mechanisms. The recommended techniques for inducing transmutation are those of subtle contemplation and the cultivation of the symbolic imagination. As Heron himself continues, “the traditional home of transmutative skills has been in the religious and mystical schools and traditions, both in the East and the West. These subtle skills are to do with the management of consciousness itself, and are acquired by what may be termed consciousness training” (Heron, 1982, 10). The suggested effects of such training, in relation to distorted and distressed feelings, are two-fold. Either they simply dissolve and lose their hold on the psyche, or (and here Heron makes his alchemical metaphor explicit) they become “transmuted from base metal into the gold of finer affect” (Heron, 1982, 4).

Political divergence

Although both RC and CCI co-counsellors see human society as substantially dysfunctional and oppressive, Harvey Jackins and John Heron have bequeathed fundamentally different understandings of why and how this should be. Harvey Jackins’ position is that of classical Marxism: “all human societies … to date have been oppressive societies in which the results of the work of most people have been taken from them by the ruling people in the form of a kind of legal robbery” (Jackins 1976, 44). Under capitalism in particular, the co-operation of oppressed people themselves is needed to enforce the status quo on themselves and each other. This can be done by what Marx would have called a socialisation into a false consciousness and what Jackins calls the installation of distress patterns. RC seems to see two fundamental results flowing from the distress patterns which hold people in place. When the pattern is ‘restimulated’ (i.e. triggered) “the first result is for the person to be forced again into the role filled by the original hurt experience … to accept the invalidating feeling, to be defeated in the attempt to remain human. The slave agrees to be a slave … the wage worker feels inferior and ‘lucky to have a job’. The second result occurs when, in an attempt to escape the role described in the first result above, the victim … seeks relief by trying to occupy a so-called different role in the distress recording – the role of the oppressor” (Jackins, 1976, 147). The energies of oppressed groups can therefore be turned against each other: “it seems a little safer to organise gang warfare against the other culture in the next block then it is to go tackle City Hall”. The role of co-counselling is to challenge the distress pattern by identifying and discharging the distress so as to see the world as it really is and redirect one’s energies accordingly. This is the contribution of RC to politics.

RC therefore has an analysis of society which sees it as systematically distress-creating as a necessary means of keeping its dominant structures in place. When John Heron, for CCI, talks about ‘catharsis and community’ we find - without any explicit rebuttal of the RC position – a significant shift of emphasis. Asserting that a cathartic society would represent a very mature phase of human development, he sees it as demonstrating a number of important characteristics:

“Authoritarian social structures become irrelevant and intolerable … in organisational processes, there is a greater emphasis on delegation, open communication, genuine consultation, participation in decision making and consensus.

“The helping professions start to deprofessionalise themselves in the sense that their function becomes increasingly that of training a whole range of peer self-help groups in the community, from co-counselling to mutual technical and social aid of various kinds" (Heron 1977, 55).

The suggestion here is that our present society falls down in these respects because, being non-cathartic, it is immature. Oppression results from distress rather than as in the Jackins model, distress from oppression. Provided we can clean up our personal histories and transform our child-rearing practices, social injustices will be revealed as the terrible mistake they are and begin to dissolve. Change happens essentially as a product of collective growth and not of political struggle. There is no sense of oppression being structural, systemic or benefitting anyone. And although there is considerable discussion about change at the level of the organisation, profession or (in another passage not quoted above) the nuclear family – where changes at the micro level might be effected by small groups of people in their own settings – there is nothing that touches the level of the economy or society as a whole.

At one level, Heron seems to echo Jackins: distress distortions are endemic in society and have helped to shape how it works. Co-counselling, by liberating people from their distress may therefore have an ancillary role in social change – though it should not in itself be seen as a substitute for politics. As Heron says, "the complementary poles of personal growth and social change both need independent attention: neither one can be a substitute for the other" (Heron 1977, 56).

But the way in which political problems are understood is significantly different. This is seen very clearly in Heron's approach to gender relations, where he says: "gender rigidities are dissolved, so that men are liberated from the masculine stereotype and women from the feminine stereotype – with much greater reciprocity and equivalence of role and function" (Heron 1977, 55). Jackins' understanding has sharper political edge. "Sisters in RC can have good sessions and recover more of their intelligence from occlusion [NB: of human flexibility and creativity caused by the accumulation of undischarged distress] in their sessions, but if they go on being treated in the traditional sexist way between sessions they will lose ground overall. The dead pressure of sexist invalidation will shove them back between sessions faster than they can get out during them" (Jackins 1976, 41). Logically, the two statements could be made compatible, but

Jackins represents a greater level of political seriousness: he addresses the question of power.

Perhaps because of this difference in political sensibility, CCI, unlike RC, does not have an activist tradition. In practice, politics and social concern very easily drop off the agenda of the Community. The developmental energy seems to be more inward than that of RC with some people emphasising the promotion of progressive child-rearing practices and others placing greater stress on what was earlier referred to as 'consciousness training'. Certainly the latter tendency is very clearly represented in the pre-occupations of the co-operative inquiry group as reported in chapters 5 and 6 below.

CHAPTER TWO: CO-COUNSELLING, HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLGY AND HEALTH

Fellow travellers

Is co-counselling a unique phenomenon, a completely isolated voice within modern Western culture? One of the differences between the two movements discussed in he last chapter has been that, whilst RC has tended to develop in isolation, CCI has always seen itself as part of a wider current of humanistic psychology. Perhaps this has been helped by the fact that John Heron had already set up the Human Potential Research Project, the first publicly funded 'growth centre' working on humanistic lines in Europe, by the time he and his organisation became involved in co-counselling.

So what is humanistic psychology and what gives co-counselling, at any rate in its CCI version, a claim to be part of it? Humanistic psychology has often been called the 'third force' in psychology to distinguish itself it from two other, pre-existing, forces, behaviourism and psychoanalysis. It is distinguished from most of the other schools by its optimism about human nature. Behaviourism is essentially a project to treat psychology as if it were a natural science, building knowledge through a detached 'objective' system of experimental observation and measurement. It quickly developed the notion that much spontaneous and natural behaviour is fundamentally anti-social and needs to be corrected by an external system of rewards and punishments called 'conditioning'. "The young child has to learn to be clean and not to defecate wherever and whenever he pleases; he has to suppress the overt expression of his sexual and aggressive urges; he must not beat other children when they do things he does not like; he must learn not to take things which do not belong to him. In every society there is a long list of prohibitions of acts which are declared to be bad, naughty and immoral and which, although they are attractive to him and are self-rewarding, he must nonetheless desist from carrying out' (Eysenck 1965, cited in Rowan 1976, 194).

Behaviourism sees itself as being strongly opposed to psychoanalysis, which appears woolly, unscientific, hard to understand and impossible to check. Yet from a humanistic point of view, the behaviourist and the analyst may seem like brothers under the skin. For psychoanalysis say that if we look far enough inside ourselves we will find the 'id', the turbulent and immoral powerhouse of our unconscious systems. Unsurprisingly, given this picture of the psyche, one of the main objectives of the analyst is to help the 'ego' (the conscious personality) to get some ort of control over the force of the libido which comes from the id. Psychoanalysis emphasises social rules and norms: the answer to the problem of the id is good socialisation, where we learn how to adapt in terms of the 'reality principle' and tame our anti-social urges.

Humanistic psychology does not share this view. Its fundamental principle is that human beings are basically aiming towards a constructive self-fulfilment: the problem arises when they are damaged or deflected from this aim. As Carl Rogers says in his book *On becoming a person:* "when we are able to free the individual from defensiveness … his reactions may be trusted to be positive, forward-moving, constructive' (Rogers 1961 cited in Rowan, 1976, 176). Clearly this outlook has a close family resemblance to the co-counselling theory of distress distortion and re-evaluation through catharsis. If we accept the notion of three forces in psychology, co-counsellors would seem very naturally to have a place within the humanistic school.

Background to humanistic psychology: Carl Rogers

Humanistic psychology arose roughly contemporaneously with Re-evaluation Counseling. Carl Rogers started to put forward his own ideas about counselling in the early 1940's and won widespread acceptance for them over the next 15 years. The essence of the Rogerian approach is that it is 'client-centred'. Rogers believed that the best vantage point for understanding behaviour was the internal frame of reference of individuals themselves (Rogers, 1951) Rogers' theory of personal development is one in which people have one basis drive – to actualise, maintain and enhance the experiencing organism, a portion of whose perceptual field gradually becomes differentiated as the 'self' during the course of early development and maturation. "As a result of interaction with the environment, and particularly as a result of evaluational interaction with others, the structure of self is formed – an organized, fluid, but consistent conceptual pattern of perceptions of characteristics and relationships of the 'I' or the 'me', together with values attached to those concepts" (Rogers 1951, 498). As experiences occur in the life of an individual, they are either symbolised, perceived and organized into some relationship to the self, or ignored because there is no perceived relationship to the self structure, or denied symbolization or given a distorted symbolization because the experience is inconsistent with the structure of the self.

It is in this last case that trouble arises. A child believes that it loves its baby brother all the time, because the values and reward systems of the home make it unacceptable to hate him for some of the time. The problem is that the experience of hating does occur, but it cannot be admitted into the self construct. The organism denies to awareness significant sensory and visceral experiences and there comes into being an underlying state of psychological tension. Later, those experiences which are inconsistent with the organization or structure of self may be perceived as a threat and “the more of these perceptions there are, the more rigidly the self-structure is organized to maintain itself” (Rogers 1951, 515). Counselling is a process of personal exploration designed to reverse this development. Under conditions involving the absence of any threat to the self-structure, experiences which are inconsistent with it may be perceived and examined, and the structure of self revised to assimilate and include such experiences. As the individual perceives and accepts into his self-structure more of his organic experiences, “he finds that he is replacing his present value *system* – based so largely on introjections [i.e. other peoples’ opinions JN] which have been distortedly symbolized (as though they were the subject’s own opinions) – with a continuing organismic valuing *process*” (Rogers 1951, 522). It is in this context that some people in humanistic psychology, borrowing from existentialism, talk about ‘authenticity’.

The successful counsellor needs to fulfil three core conditions in order to facilitate this process successfully. The first is ‘congruence’. “The more the counsellor is able to be herself in the relationship without putting up a professional front or personal façade, the greater will be the chance of the client changing and developing” (Mearns and Thorne 1988, 14). The second requirement in creating a climate for change is the counsellor’s ability to offer the client ‘unconditional positive regard’. This helps the client to face himself honestly without the ever-present fear of rejection and condemnation. Moreover the intensive experience of the counsellor’s acceptance is the context in which he is most likely to experience the first momentary feelings of self-acceptance. The third core condition is ‘empathetic understanding’. When this is present the counsellor demonstrates a capacity to track and sense accurately the feelings and personal meanings of the client, and develops the ability, through reflective feedback to communicate to the client this sensitive and acceptant understanding. As Mearns and Thorne say: “to be understood in this way is for many clients a rare or even a unique experience … empathetic understanding restores … a sense of belonging to the human race” (Mearns and Thorne 1988, 15).

The approach, whilst a professional one, has many parallels to co-counselling, and may consequently produce similar results. Rogers himself once outlined a seven stage process for clients in counselling based on an analysis of several recorded sessions, in which the sixth stage was: “a breakthrough stage, where feelings come through, are experienced now and accepted. Physiological loosening takes place, and also a mental loosening of previous ways of seeing the world and self” (Rogers 1961, cited in Rowan 1976, 56). This seems identical to the cathartic breakthrough aimed at by co-counselling.

Background to humanistic psychology: Abraham Maslow

Abraham Maslow is another central figure in humanistic psychology. His theory of human needs and human development says very clearly that there is a normal process of growth which applies to all people. The details of the theory are outlined in Rowan, 1976 and the following is a paraphrased summary of his account. We start with purely physiological needs, which have to be satisfied. Once these are satisfied to an acceptable extent, security needs appear and we want a fixed framework for our world – something firm to hang onto and believe in. Once we have this to an acceptable extent, effectance needs appear, and we want to achieve some form of mastery over our own bodies and the world around us (at this stage seen in rather rigid terms, and on a win/lose basis. Then, needs for love and belongingness appear, and we seek general social approval. Then we need to gain the esteem of others. Then our own self-esteem needs appear. And when these have been met to a satisfactory degree, our full ‘self-actualisation’ needs appear. We seek to realise our full potential, to raise our sense of what is possible, to explore our own creativity, our need to know and understand, our need for beauty.

As with Jackins and Heron and Rogers, there is an emphasis on continuing development. Human potential is naturally healthy and dynamic: the current social norm represents a level far below the full flowering of human possibility, the extent of which is almost limitless. It was Maslow who launched humanistic psychology as an organised movement. In 1954 he created a mailing list for the purpose of circulating duplicated copies of articles that could no longer be published in the official journals because of the commitment of those journals to the behaviourist or psychoanalytic orthodoxies. From 1957 he and a colleague began to discuss the launching of their own journal, but it was not until 1961 that the first issue of *The Journal of Humanistic Psychology* appeared. An Association of Humanistic Psychology, at first linked with Brandeis University, was created in 1963 and became an independent charity in 1965.

Background to humanistic psychology: other influences

Two other strands of thinking and practice should be mentioned. These are existential approaches to therapy and the transformation in exile of two former analysts, Fritz Perls and Wilhelm Reich, who became very influential in the humanistic movement.

The best known representatives of existentialism in therapy in the UK have been Ronald Laing and David Cooper. Though they began as psychiatrists, working in NHS hospitals, their approach denies the whole concept of mental illness as medically understood. “Laing is not concerned with disordered perception of external reality, but with the falsification of the self. To an existentialist psychiatrist the purpose of therapy is to allow the person to recover a sense of self and of personal authenticity. Not competence in dealing with the normal environment, not a reduction in the discomfort of fear, and not adjustment to the family setting … but self-awareness and access to the full range of feelings from despair to ecstasy, together with the courage and the strength to be open to experience” (Rowan 1976, 9). Society is seen as systematically reproducing mental distress because of being arranged in certain ways – one of the most disastrous of these arrangements being the nuclear family, because it forms a teaching situation in which men learn how to oppress women and both men and women learn how to oppress children. Cooper says, “from the moment of birth most people progress through the social learning situations of the family and school until they learn to achieve social normality. Some others break down during this process and regress to what is called madness … Others, very few, manage to slip through the state of inertia or arrest represented by … normality and progress to some extent on the way to sanity, retaining an awareness of the criteria of social normality so that they may avoid invalidation" (Cooper, cited in Wilber 1980, 159). As with humanistic therapy, so with existential therapy – there is a process of questioning all that is false in the person, and its object in doing that is to lay bare all that is true in the person, in the confidence that what is true in the person is also positive.

Fritz Perls and Wilhelm Reich both arrived in the United States in the late 1930's as exiles from the Nazis. Both trained analytically, both shared what we now see as the common humanistic concern with authenticity and both developed new therapeutic techniques to further their work. Reich saw distress and tension being locked in the musculature of the body and creating 'character armour' which went hand in hand with the construction of repressed and distorted personality. Reich thought that the repression of sexual feelings lay at the root of rigid, inhuman and repressive social systems and in particular the creation of an 'authoritarian personality structure'. The more productive ways of working that have grown up under his influence have focused on body work – deep tissue massage and forms of exercise which bring about cathartic release and physical re-structuring. The basic philosophy resembles that of co-counselling, but the method is different and operates on a more profound somatic level. Skilled co-counsellors in CCI do however use Reichian and neo-Reichian techniques as certain times.

The same is true of the Gestalt therapy developed by Fritz Perls. Here the attempt is made to get the person aware and in contact instead of suppressing what is going on. Perls warns against two destructive tendencies. The first is 'shouldism', also called 'the self-torture game' – the game that says we should be different. Co-counselling identifies many such 'shoulds' as emanating from old parental injunctions and then taken on by a distressed and bullying inner parent. The second is 'aboutism', the paraphernalia of stories and rationalisations about the problem or issue. Perls sees this as an attempt to keep any real awareness or contact at arm's length by an intellectual process: he broke with analysis largely because he came to see it as an alienating 'interpretation game'. The aim is to be fully awake in the here and now; there is a parallel here with the co-counselling belief that the counsellor does not need to investigate the 'story' in order to support the discharge process, and in the concept of 'present time' as the desired, post-cathartic state of awareness.

Humanistic psychology and 'transpersonal' experience

Humanistic psychology, at least for some people, hovers on the fringes of the spiritual. We have already seen (Chapter 1 above) that John Heron (Heron 1982) enters this territory in his discussion of 'transmutation'. This attitude is reflected in the writings of other humanistic psychologists. Perls says: "the task of all deep religions, especially Zen Buddhism – and of really good therapy is the *satori*, the great awakening, the coming to one's senses, waking up from one's dream … When we come to our senses we start to see, to feel, to experience our needs and satisfactions, instead of playing roles' (Perls 1969, cited in Rowan 1976, 65).

There is indeed a school of thought, of which Wilber is perhaps the most articulate exponent, which says that the task of humanistic psychology is evolutionary in a very specific way. It is to take people from the normal state of functioning in our present state of society through to a more developed state of awareness in which we stand on the brink of a profounder spiritual realisation, often called 'transpersonal'. Wilber's model (Wilber 1980) is complex and in many respects problematic (see Nichol, 1993). But in essence it suggests that people who have been systematically engaged in humanist/existentialist work for a period of time almost inevitably reach the point where they are challenged by intimations of transcendence; spiritual themes force themselves onto the agenda. Wilber's ideas contrast strongly with other developmental theories (e.g. Holland 1990) suggesting that greater awareness leads on to a greater focus on political consciousness and social action.

Humanistic psychology and the idea of health

It seems clear from the above that there are common perspectives within the humanistic psychology movement and that they do add up to a coherent view of health. The humanistic idea of health is located in the developmental needs of the person – whether physical, mental, emotional or spiritual. Indeed the person is a single system, so even these distinctions should be treated with caution. The basic pre-condition for health is that the human organism should be allowed to change and develop in those ways that are natural for it. The problem as perceived by humanistic psychology is that human beings in present society tend to be at a relatively low point on the continuum because their socialisation has brought about distortions in development leading to the creation of false and maladaptive ways of being. This being so the tendency of the distress distorted collective is to hold individuals firmly in their own distress distorted place.

In terms of a ‘paradigm map’ offered to mental health promoters by Ray Holland (Holland, 1990) humanistic psychology occupies the position of ‘radical humanism’. The intention of the map is to plot contrasting epistemologies (‘paradigms’) using two axes to define four spaces; each type of knowledge generates its own model of mental health. One axis concerns the degree to which human societies are seen as fundamentally well-ordered or dysfunctional; the second distinguishes objective and subjective forms of knowledge. Epistemological evolution is presented as a sequential movement through four positions: functionalism, interpretive analysis, radical humanism, and radical structuralism (see figure 1).

The split between the two co-counselling communities, on this reading, could be seen as not so much an organisational and personality clash as a paradigm battle – an antagonistic meeting between to fundamentally different world views. Holland’s map comes from a wholly materialist tradition and does not recognise a spiritual dimension. Any work stemming from such a dimension would probably have to be treated as interpretive analysis and be seen as a confused falling away from political insight and engagement. I suggest later (Chapter 8 below) that this points to a significant limitation within Holland’s project.

Figure 1

OBJECTIVE **4 Radical structuralism** Social oppression is seen as fundamental and as objectively determined. Ultimately, mental health requires the ending of all systemic oppressions. This is the stance of Marxist mental health and RC co-counselling **RADICAL**	**OBJECTIVE** **1 Functionalism** This adopts an objective approach to knowledge and an acceptance of social norms. It is the stance of Western medicine, where mental illness is diagnosed and treated primarily as an organic condition, and also of behaviourist psychology. It is the position of *The health of the nation* (Department of Health, 1992). **CONSERVATIVE**
RADICAL **3 Radical humanism** The honouring of subjective experience is taken further. Society is now seen as a source of disempowerment and as stunting the development of human potential. This is the perspective of humanistic psychology and of CCI co-counselling. **SUBJECTIVE**	**CONSERVATIVE** **2 Interpretive analysis** This approach continues to accept social norms, but validates forms of learning derived from the subjective experience of individuals. Mental health is achieved through the conscious unpacking of internal conflicts. This is the approach of psychoanalysis and some other therapies. **SUBJECTIVE**

CHAPTER THREE: CHOOSING A RESEARCH METHOD

Subject and method

John Heron makes an explicit point about research in a discussion on theory revision in co-counselling. "If catharsis is one of the necessary processes whereby human beings liberate their distress occluded intelligence, as well as their capacities for love and creative will, then that process comes of age when the liberated intelligence reviews the theoretical assumptions in terms of which it has been liberated. The cognitive and the experiential circle round each other, ideally, in mutually enhancing ways. What I call experiential research involves two or more persons systematically in a three stage process. (1) They agree intellectually on a plausible psychodynamic theory. (2) They cash it out experientially on their own growth and behaviour, using some form of reciprocal support, and for a significant period of time. (3) they review the original theory in the light of their experience of systematically living through its practical implications" (Heron 1977, 48).

Experiential research is another expression, in Ray Holland's terms (Holland 1990) of the 'radical humanist' paradigm. As such it represents a break with the dominant functionalist paradigm of conventional science, including psychology, in a number of ways: in its assumptions, its practice, and in the sort of questions it is willing to ask. It is concerned with the subjective experience of human beings in the process of supported change and development. It is also democratic. The subject of the research is not distinguished from the researcher or, to put it more politically, not alienated from the researcher and turned into an object. Differences of power and status are removed. So are the pretensions of the researcher to be a disinterested party somehow outside the process.

Co-operative inquiry is an essentially a refinement on Heron's earlier thinking about experiential research. An early reference to it as a distinctive methodology appears in *Human inquiry: a sourcebook of new paradigm research* (Heron in Reason & Rowan, eds. 1981, 19), where he says: "… the way of co-operative inquiry is for the researcher to interact with the subjects so that they do contribute directly both to hypothesis-making, to formulating the final conclusions, and to what goes on in between. … In the complete form of this research, not only will the subject be a fully-fledged co-researcher, but the researcher will also be co-subject, participating fully in the action and experience to be researched.

The model is further explored in a second compilation (Reason, ed. 1988). In his introduction, Reason is at pains to say that not all of the values of the ‘old’ paradigm should be disregarded. “The old world-view, with its fragmented and alienated mechanical metaphors, is discarded as we move into a participatory universe. But I think that this move can be seen as a synthesis in which, while much is negated and discarded, significant aspects are retained and re-integrated. For what we keep of the old scientific view are the ideals of critical and public knowledge. Indeed the notion of critical subjectivity means that we are more demanding than orthodox science, insisting that valid inquiry is based on a very high degree of self-knowing, self-reflection and co-operative criticism. Good co-operative inquiry in both wholeheartedly involved and intensively self-critical” (Reason 1988, 13).

Critical subjectivity

“Once we reach levels higher than those of the senses, once we reach mind, we are dealing with structures of meaning that no empirical-sensory evidence can decide, and therefore we are forced into (or rather privileged to use) symbolic, mental and communicative discussion and interpretation to decide the crucial issues” (Wilber 1983, 276).

My own view is that the concept of critical subjectivity is insufficiently developed by Heron and Reason and its full implications inadequately represented in the co-operative inquiry model presented by them. Particularly in Heron, I perceive a residue of a desire for experimental proof (hypothesis-test-result) that could take an inquiry in a reductionist direction. Wilber’s point is, that if you want to establish meaning in *Macbeth*, then you have to do it another way, which he calls hermeneutics, defined as intersubjective discussion within a community of concerned interpreters. I believe that the same may be aid of much of the material in a co-operative inquiry. My own sense of comfort with this approach is perhaps derived from my original training as a student of literature - and of being reminded of how L.

C. Knights, the Shakespearean scholar, talks about his work: “what the critic as interpreter says, in effect, is – here is a pattern of development that makes sense: it is not the only pattern, for what we see depends partly at least on the set of our own interests, and different generations, different individuals ask different questions of any work of art … credentials … are to be found in the extent to which (the pattern) establishes coherence among a wide range of promptings that qualified readers are likely to admit as being there, in the plays” (Knights 1959, 24).

Further support for this approach to the attainment of critical subjectivity is provided in Grof, 1985. His critique of the ‘Newtonian-Cartesian model’ (Holland’s functionalist paradigm) is derived from the hard sciences themselves, particularly quantum-relativistic theory, and also from developments in cybernetics and systems theory. Grof arrives at a theory of knowledge in which what we know becomes a kaleidoscope of information of which we are part and out of which we must create our own pattern “In everyday life, we never deal with objects but with their sensory transforms or messages about differences … we have access to maps, but not the territory” (Grof 1985, 15). Any concept of reality is therefore provisional; arriving at consensus becomes a matter of great delicacy and not an outcome to be insisted upon.

Although the February 1993 inquiry achieved a reasonable balance of experience and review, some of its best energies went into discussion. There was a tension between the inquiry model as inherited in particular from Heron – with its emphasis on a quasi-experimental research cycle of proposition-test-review – and another concern with mapping, sharing, challenging, refining and celebrating certain core beliefs of people in the group. Indeed the tension became conscious within the group and was discussed on the last day of the inquiry.

Having now organised and facilitated a complete inquiry, my present view is that the more traditional approach is mistaken. By choosing the wrong validity tests, it opens itself to serious criticism by empirical scientists on the grounds of imprecision, subjectivity and the failure to identify, control and test for the significant variables: it tries to fight on impossible ground. At the same time it dishonours the richness of experience within the inquiry group by channelling it too narrowly. This is an unnecessary loss since the intended rigour of critical subjectivity in experiential research is far better sustained by a clear hermeneutic approach rather than a fuzzy experimental one. In constructing any future inquiry, I would abandon experimental pretensions completely. Co-operative inquiry generates a different kind of knowledge.

Co-operative inquiry: ways of working

In retrospect I see the 1993 inquiry as being guided by six criteria (discussed more fully in Chapter 7 below) – though these were not clear and explicit at the time.

1. Avoid reductionism by using the lived experience of the whole person in the research, including their own capacity for self-determination
2. Avoid scientific rituals and mannerisms which appear objective whilst neglecting to question their own fundamental assumptions
3. Generate an open and democratic relationship between the researchers and subjects, making subject co-researchers and researchers co-subjects.
4. Honour feelings and intuition and allow people to reflect on and tell their own stories
5. Acknowledge the provisional and relative nature of 'reality' in human experience (the map is not the territory). At the same time strive to recognise and thereby create in that experience elements of underlying pattern and form.
6. Retain the scientific ideal of a critical and public knowledge, generated through the disciplines of rigorous self-reflexivity and hermeneutic exchange. Within co-operative inquiry specifically, this discipline is reinforced by a proposition-experience-review cycle built into the process

Most of the people in the inquiry group already knew each other. Everybody in the group knew at least some of the others well. (The second statement also applies to the three people who contributed written material but did not attend the inquiry.) They shared a common culture of working in groups and of working on distress feelings and personal issues. The ground rules and rituals of the group were therefore quickly established.

The ground rules that could be taken for granted, once it was clear that we were operating in the group as co-counsellors, covered the following areas:

- Individuals would take responsibility for their own needs and feelings
- Group members would support each other in their participation and check that everyone had space to contribute
- Group members would listen to each other with unconditional positive regard, respecting differences of view and hearing them out
- Personal feedback would be supportive – taking the form of validation or specific positive suggestions
- Normally, sessional material in co-counselling is confidential to the session, and group processes to the group. This ground rule was modified to enable the inquiry material to be used for the purposes of this research, but this was subject to each participant having the right to insist on full confidentiality for any specific material, regardless of the requirements of the research

Tow new procedures were introduced, which are not standard to co-counselling groups, but which are used in co-counselling circles from time to time. These were:

- The relevancy challenge, whereby someone can be interrupted if they seem to depart from the point being investigated
- The 'Devil's Advocate' procedure which can be used to challenge contributions on the grounds of their validity or appropriateness. Such challenges do not have to be fully reasoned out: they can be based on hunches, feelings or even projections. The possibility that this may be the case is signalled by the introductory remark: 'the Devil in me says …'

Those two changes depart from the usual (somewhat purist) notion of unconditional positive regard which prevents the interruption of someone who is speaking or any negative feedback about what they have said. But it was recognised that an inquiry group is different from a therapy group and that it needs some sort of edge. Even so, challenges like these were made in the spirit of positive regard and co-operative relating.

The rituals of the group were mainly those common to co-counselling. These rituals are designed to anchor and maintain a kind of sacred space within which group members may engage safely in more open ways of being themselves and more intimate forms of communication than is usual in other settings:

- Opening and closing circles at the beginning and end of each day, where all group members stand linking arms in a circle and say something about how they are feeling and something positive about what is going on for them or about the project in which they are all engaged. The circle may end with a chant, a song or a period of silence
- Shared meals to which each person makes a contribution and which are jointly prepared
- The opportunity for short 'mini' co-counselling sessions to clear minor distress and raise energy
- The use of active physical games, often based on children's games, to re-vitalise the group individually and collectively when attention flags or mental concentration needs a holiday
- Hugs and touch when wanted

The inquiry group developed three additional rituals. The first arose spontaneously because one of the participants, who had flown from Bangkok to be present, brought a gift of orchids purchased from a local market shortly before her flight. These flowers were placed in the middle of the circle whenever the group was working. At the end of the inquiry, they were divided between the members to take home. The second ritual comprised short sessions of meditation at the beginning and end of both the morning and afternoon sessions and some other important transitional moments of the inquiry. The other ritual event occurred in the closing circle on Saturday and noted the fact that it was a full moon. One of the participants read a poem about this, together with a commentary to the effect that the full moon is traditionally held to be a prime time for spiritual and psychological breakthrough.

The content of the inquiry involved a cycle of proposition, experiential test and review. The first proposition concerned 'free attention', which at its simplest level is the kind and quality of listening skill with which co-counsellors support their self-directing clients.

However the group made many more connections than that and the work on this proposition, described in Chapter 5 of this dissertation, took the whole of Saturday. The work on Sunday focused around ‘discharge’, the cathartic release which plays a central role in the co-counselling tradition. Here, two propositions were addressed and a distinction between two types of enabling discharge tentatively made (see Chapter 6 below). The work on Sunday also lead to a critical re-evaluation of the co-operative inquiry process itself and its validity as a research method, discussed in Chapter 7.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE QUESTIONNAIRES

Experiences of initiation

12 people completed preliminary questionnaires. 8 had been co-counselling for over 10 years: of these, 4 had completed their initial fundamentals training in 1979, 2 in 1980, one in 1981 and one in 1982. 5 of these 8 people also participated in the inquiry weekend. Of the remaining 4 people, one had learned to co-counsel in 1986, one in 1988 and 2 had completed their fundamentals in February 1991. Everyone from this second group took part in the inquiry weekend.

People had been introduced to co-counselling in a variety of ways. 8 people had learned about it through personal contact – 5 from friends and acquaintances, 2 through existing groups (women's and men's consciousness raising) and one from their therapist. Of the remaining 4, 2 had enrolled in classes with co-counselling specifically in mind and the other two with something else in mind (pastoral skills and assertiveness) at least in the first instance. The specific impulse to do co-counselling varied from 'curiosity' to 'desperation'. Most people were primarily interested in the opportunity to do personal work; the learning of counselling skills took second place.

Initial reaction to fundamentals training varied considerable. Of the 11 people with comments to share on this question, 6 had found the course to be a transformatory experience:

"A tremendous release of energy, like flat champagne becoming fizzy again … excitement at new interactions and intimacy of thoughts, feelings. Also disconcerting feelings surrounding investigation into my childhood, exciting various, sometimes disturbing emotions" (Suniiti)

"I was glowing. People, even strangers, would start talking to me and telling the most intimate things about themselves …. I felt as though I had been let out of a deep dark prison … a positive and spontaneous relationship to myself was a door to transformation" (Alan)

One respondent reported a negative reaction to the experience, albeit one containing seeds of more positive development. “It highlighted my awareness of my inadequacies and made me aware of limitations and possibilities I’d had no inkling of. I didn’t join CCI as a member till long after Fundamentals – feeling incompetent in using the method” (Evelyn).

Current practices

Among the people who have been co-counselling for 10 or more years, there is a tendency towards a less regular or systematic practice of co-counselling than in earlier years. In some cases the contrast is with an intense period of activity at the beginning; for others (e.g. Evelyn and James) the contrast is with an intermediate period. This reduced activity level seems to be balance by a continuing appreciation of the co-counselling ethos and its influence.

“I don’t use the methods as a regular part of my life, but it is certainly one of the more important skills I possess. These ease and depth with which I now communicate certainly spring from co-counselling” (Evelyn).

“I have less enthusiasm about it – I use it less intensively than I used to – I can still see its profound value to my life and it is an ongoing consciousness ‘stream’ underlying a lot of life/actions/thoughts. The intimacy and familiarity it left me with my own feelings will never leave me” (Michele).

“I am not co-counselling on a weekly basis which I was in my first year, and I am not a regular part of the workshop circuit. I think this is a natural and normal state of affairs for me, and that co-counselling values and practices have bedded down into my life rather dominating them as they did in the first year” (Sue).

Rea talks about refashioning co-counselling with the help of other influences to make up for perceived deficiencies. (She has subsequently gone on to form ger own ‘Inter Allies Network’ which borrows substantially from co-counselling but is also heavily influenced by the ideas of Alice Miller and Rachel Pinney.) Alan and Peter both make the point that their relationship to co-counselling has become more discriminating and express reservations; James talks of a reduced level of activity but a continued interest in teaching and community building. Anne puts her emphasis on a continuing positive commitment. Whilst registering some frustration with aspects of community life and the slow pace of some change, she affirms that: "As it did when I began, CC seems like a wonderful way to change myself and my world … my essential faith in it seems to be unshaken … the clear stream at the centre of it all still runs clear for me."

Of the 4 people who learned co-counselling between 1986 and 1991, only one, Suniiti, reports a diminished level of activity: "I'm not so enthusiastic at arranging so many sessions". However she also finds the process itself to be "more flowing and yielding". Michael notes a change in his perception of the co-counselling process: "initially I saw co-counselling as a 'cure' for my problems. I now see it as a long term way of dealing with my emotional side and a continual assessment/tool in my life". Jet comments that "co-counselling still really excites me … it probably amazes me more now, at first it felt new and fresh and wonderful and that hasn't worn off, I still get that clarity. I am more creative in sessions now …" Finally Martin says that he is "much more involved; clearer grasp of the processes and rationale; more sessions – generally more enthusiastic and appreciative of its power to transform. Evangelical."

There seems to me to be a clear overall pattern in what people are saying. Here is a group of people, all of whom have had a strong connection to co-counselling in the course of the last 10 years. Most joined with some idea of what they were letting themselves in for, and with an agenda of changing themselves. In most cases the method had a positive immediate impact and in many a very powerful one. This led, either directly or after an interval, to a strong and maturing commitment to the method, including the role of teaching, extending over a period of years. Everybody has integrated aspects of the co-counselling ethos and co-counselling to their values and everyday personal (and often professional) lives. Nevertheless, there seems to come a point where the benefits of co-counselling, certainly as a stand-alone method, wear off. It gradually ceases, for many people, to be a regular practice. Of the 8 people who have been co-counselling for more than 10 years, only one now places regular discharge and re-evaluation co-counselling at the heart of her ongoing development. So for the other 7 at least, it cannot be true to say that a continuing practice of co-counselling is *the* vehicle for unlocking limitless potential, though it clearly has been the key to unlocking certain potentials at certain times.

The above pattern may of course be unique to the people involved in the inquiry, or at least to that subset of co-counsellors who have a record of real commitment both to co-counselling and to other methods. One of the criteria for selection to the inquiry group was that co-counselling should not be their only personal development approach. By analogy, this was an attempt to deal with the limitations of personal perspective expressed in Kipling's phrase, “what do they know of England who only England know?” This may have had the effect of limiting the inquiry to a particular kind co-counsellor. However, the whole point of the discharge and re-evaluation orthodoxy is that the process is said to work equally, at all times, for everyone – except of course when they are being blocked, perverse, or incompetent. Such a logic, as well as being incipiently totalitarian and victim blaming, is also brittle and vulnerable to contradiction. Any real countervailing evidence is a threat to the entire belief system.

Other influences

Be that as it may, the inquiry participants were selected on the basis of their having other important skills and influences. The questionnaire asked them to talk about a personal development method in which they were involved other than co-counselling. 6 talked about spiritual practices including a significant component of meditation or prayer. 5 talked about other forms of personal change work including a significant component of counselling. One talked about bodywork. Some people found their other work compatible with and even complementary to co-counselling, whereas others experienced a tension between the different ways of working. In most cases (9 out of12) co-counselling was chronologically the earlier activity to be taken up by the participant, itself strongly suggesting that co-counselling was seen not to meet all developmental needs. Amongst all the differences of interests and perspectives revealed in the questionnaire responses, one common theme that seems to emerge is the desire for a balanced and harmonious fusion of activities and skills. The following extracts from questionnaire replies concern the relationship between co-counselling and, respectively, bodywork, NLP and meditation. (NLP is a cognitive-behavioural system of unusual subtlety and refinement. It is derived, not from academic psychology, but from the study of humanistic practitioners in action, and from hypnotherapy, systems theory and Chomskian linguistics).

“For a long time, since my late 20’s, I have done a lot of exercise – running, gym, aerobics etc., and I think, looking back, that I have used this as a way of dealing with/or avoiding my emotional needs. Co-counselling has helped me to get this physical side more into balance, and the idea of combining the two – bodywork and co-co – looks promising in the way it could lead to greater self-awareness and self-development” (Michael).

“It is on co-counselling and its attitude to and acceptance of emotion on a day-to-day basis that I feel my growth work within NLP has been largely based. With the fusion of this emotional dimension to the personal change techniques that NLP offers, I feel I have a growth programme that works for me” (Sue).

“My work and experience in NLP … has led me to deepen and enrich my skills in both disciplines: in co-co, my self-awareness as client is enhanced, my empathy as counsellor is sensitised. In NLP my respect for the ability of a client to be more effectively self-directed than other-directed gives my work a special quality” (Evelyn).

“Co-counsellors confront their underlying fear of feelings to discover that they are ‘only feelings’, which is surely much the same as the meditational ‘I have feelings, but I am not my feelings’. To me each practice enhances the clarity of the other and both can be practised with full and complementary commitment” (Anne).

Even here, however, there are differences. In 3 of the above cases, there are 2 streams of activity where each contributes to effectiveness in the other. But for Sue, there is one fused activity which incorporates co-counselling insights whilst at the same time removing them from the co-counselling arena. This is the path now also followed by Rea in the ‘Inner Allies’ work discussed above.

3 people present their other work as compatible but separate: Jet in the case of counselling, Michele in the case of meditation and Peter in the case of spiritual healing. Alan says that his other work, which uses meditation and bodywork techniques to

change energy states, leads on from co-counselling. The problem, for him, is that, since co-counselling has no internal mechanism for the evolution of theory, insights about how "co-co techniques are used unconsciously to squander rather than enhance energy" cannot be offered back to the co-counselling community itself.

The remaining three people seem to be looking for a fusion but not yet finding it. Martin makes a specific suggestion in his addendum to his questionnaire response concerning his own practices: "A metaphor has come to mind regarding the paradoxically contrasting ways of working: i.e. insight meditation is letting a muddy pool settle until, through the clear water, I can see what lies at the bottom – co-co is more about stirring and churning the pool to bring what lies on the bottom to the surface. Within the limitations of this metaphor – there are often large chunks of debris floating around during meditation. Classically the meditator lets go of these 'distracting' thoughts/emotions and returns again and again to the focus of the meditation. How about 'flagging' items which figure as preoccupations in a sitting to subsequently work on in a co-counselling session?"

James finds that insights from his transpersonal work have changed the meaning of what he does in co-counselling, privately if not in his teaching role, but that his co-counselling insights travel less easily into the spheres of transpersonal psychology and spiritual movements. Suniiti follows a school of tantric yoga, a devotional path involving yoga (asanas), meditation, a dietary and fasting regime, dance/music, chanting, social service and the study of spiritual philosophy. For her, co-counselling has supported her spiritual practice by addressing blocks to her flourishing. However, she expresses a concern, also mentioned by Martin, about the tendency of co-counselling to strengthen the ego where her goal is to reach a transpersonal, less egoistic and more compassionate state of being. The difference is that while Martin sees co-counselling by itself as merely unbalanced – "my pain, my conditioning, my goals, my discharge, my re-evaluation …. my attachment to my image of myself" – Suniiti sees it as potentially in complete conflict with her spiritual goals: "a strengthened ego vs. compassionate state of being".

The overall impression is of a basic loyalty to many of the things which co-counselling represents balanced by an underlying consciousness of its limitations. Co-counselling values are attractive and the practice of co-counselling works in a variety of contexts. But for Sue its personal change techniques are relatively ineffective compared to those made available through NLP; for Evelyn the self-awareness of the client and the empathy of the counsellor are improved by the application of NLP skills; for Rea the work on early childhood hurts requires a considerable refinement of technique to create real and lasting healing; for Alan co-counselling squanders energy; for Martin and Suniiti co-counselling practice fosters an inappropriate or unbalanced attachment to *I* and *mine*. The message is clear: co-counselling by itself is inadequate to meet all developmental needs.

Assessments of the method

50 comments were made listing benefits of the method, and 16 listing limitations. (Figures are provided, not because of any implied significance s a quantitative measure, but as a simple means of indicating the issues raised and the range of opinion expressed by the respondents.) 10 of the favourable comments were about the peer principle, with 2 more about the related idea of the client being 'in charge' of their own sessions. There is however the sense that within the actually existing community "some are more equal than others". Another 10 of the favourable comments concerned free attention, described by one participant as "the greatest gift one person can give to another … it is the look in the eyes of the saint". Free attention in co-counselling terms is the here and now presence and supportive listening which counsellors offer their clients. A further comment focused on unconditional positive regard, which can be seen as an aspect of the same concept. 16 comments stressed the direct personal development advantages of being in the network – opportunities for developing counselling and facilitation skills (5), a mechanism for personal support (4), and the motivation provided by being in a culture that emphasised personal celebration (4) and personal change (3).

Of the 11 favourable comments remaining, 6 concerned the discharge/re-evaluation process – a somewhat modest total, given its crucial position in co-counselling theory. 3 comments were about the procedure of 'taking directions' out of sessions – i.e. generating a specific insight or resolution at the end of the session to use in restructuring the client's self-sense or to apply to daily life. The remaining favourable comments concerned the opportunity to do bodywork in co-counselling sessions, and “a superb sense of group dynamics”.

5 of the negative comments related to the discharge/re-evaluation process – either as a limited and mechanistic theory or as something that was practised badly and at times, inappropriately. 3 people alluded to a woolly niceness within co-counselling which they saw as depriving the process of a necessary edge of challenge and insecurity, and another 3 to co-counselling’s poor sense of group dynamics compared with other modes of experiential learning and humanistic therapy. One comment suggested that the custom of self-celebration could lead to a denial of inadequacies, one criticised the prevalence of jargon in co-counselling, one said that co-counselling diminished in effectiveness over time, one drew attention to the incompetence which sometimes resulted from applying the peer principle, and one to the damage caused by failures in free attention.

The most obvious point to come out of these comments is the ambivalence of the respondents towards discharge as the principal engine of transformation. A number of people chose to write about this at some length.

“ … I worry about some co-counsellors pre-suppositions that discharge and only discharge is the answer to all problems. I have felt myself in danger of becoming a discharge junkie, only feeling energetic and clear once I have discharged – and I have heard similar reports from other people – and this leads me to suspect that discharge does not remove all patterns” (Sue).

“After the initial therapeutic benefit of discharge, the regressive process and re-evaluation – I started to find that I was getting stuck, and kept coming back to the same places, without increasing the depth of my work/thoughts/transformation … this started being noticeable after 3-4 years … a certain degree of ‘addiction’ to discharge became unproductive – repetitive – stifling” (Michele).

“Discharge – client can get stuck in discharge mode – which can inadvertently become a defence against deeper hurts … have heard it described very honestly by one person who had realised that they had become addicted to the buzz created by the adrenaline released through the energetic discharge … I've seen the ability to discharged profusely used as a misuse of power over others e.g. *spoken* 'I feel really powerful having discharged my feelings/anger'; *unspoken* 'You are inadequate (at doing the same)'" (Rea).

"When any … newly required technique becomes a habit … its results are subject to a law of diminishing returns. The doors of transformation cannot be approached regularly by the same path" (Alan).

All of these respondents have had substantial experience of fluent discharge work and all say in other places that they have benefitted by this. But the sense of limitation around this approach is clearly very strong.

Assessments of the Community

In relation to the life of the Community, negative comments (31) outnumbered positive ones (21). There is however a lack of clarity about whether respondents are talking about CCI as a whole or the London Community specifically. The London Community has a reputation within CCI for manifesting the institutional shortcomings of the wider movement in an aggravated form, and since most of the questionnaire respondents have mainly worked in London, this will almost certainly have influenced the tenor of the questionnaire replies in a negative direction.

The main perceived benefits, as revealed by the positive questionnaire responses (numbers of comments shown in brackets) are the existence of a flexible (1) support (1) network offering a contact list (3) and a variety of workshops (4), ongoing peer groups (4) and skill building opportunities (5) to its members. Of those people listing skill building, 2 specifically mention the opportunity to access non-co-counselling skills *within* the network. This is because, although the basic theory of co-counselling has remained static, co-counsellors within CCI can contract to do other things in co-counselling settings. Indeed there is a belief in some quarters, which I share, that unusually powerful kinds of personal development activity are enabled when a group of co-counsellors decides to do something else. Three other benefits receive one mention each – 'messy democracy' (as a challenging way to learn about people), working with touch, and friendship (mentioned by several other people in other parts of the questionnaire).

The negative comments mainly relate to aspects of leadership, decision making and community participation. 6 comments refer specifically to poor decision making and 4 to the poor balance of democracy and leadership – the phrase 'the tyranny of structurelessness' is used. Some of these comments are procedural; others record the perception that CCI co-counsellors compulsively undermine leaders both in workshops and in the wider community. In addition to the comments enumerated above there are also 2 other additional comments about poor collective communication, one which expresses disappointment at the often wounded and rancorous tone of the London magazine (ironically called *The Hug*) and one to the effect that "energy is not supported". 2 people comment that the teaching cadre themselves do not work collectively, one says that the criteria for accreditation are unclear, and one refers to difficulties in the process for assessing whether people who complete Fundamentals' classes are ready to join the community: she senses an inconsistency in the decisions being made. One participant criticises the co-counselling assumption that all co-counsellors are able to be self-responsible as "over-optimistic", while another bemoans the loose commitment of community members, and a third the lack of intensity within the network.

In a sense these are all the sort of complaints that might be expected from people who have been activists and leaders in a voluntary organisation, but the emphasis on the downside of anarchic fellowship is very strong, despite the universal pride taken in the idea of self-direction and the peer principle. My personal view is that many of the problems arise because people come into co-counselling from a world that is arranged hierarchically. Some hierarchies have a simple command structure. Others are participatory to varying degrees. Such a situation means that people learn to live in hierarchies, where decisions are made by restricted groups which have therefore to be somehow influenced, accommodated or evaded. Co-counsellors bring with them into the room the baggage (passivity, rebellion, underhand behaviour or the desire to be top dog) which hierarchical life fosters; at first glance, the community seems to provide an exhilarating opportunity to behave in a way that simply reverses conventional compliance in favour of prickly self-assertion. The notion of any collective life, of common goals or the place for some kind of leadership in achieving them is simply not recognised. It is of course possible to explore these issues using co-counselling sessions and pertinent workshop exercises and this is to some extent done. But it is not done systematically for the whole membership and it is not seen as a form of basic training.

CCI Co-counselling has assumed that people can learn to function in a peer community with a minimum of retraining, even though the basic therapeutic method promotes the development of a self-directing *I* rather than a self-directing *We.* The assumption has proved incorrect and no effective models of peerness or peer leadership have been generated except within the co-counselling dyad and to an extent within workshop settings. Beyond those levels (and sometimes within them) the Community has been unable to function in accordance with its aspirations, however passionately they are held. There is too limited a tradition of personal work on the issues, and hardly any thought about the political structures and processes required to make direct democracy an effective way of running the organisation.

There were a number of other criticisms of CCI, the most common (3 comments) being about the static and restricted theory of co-counselling. Other people commented on:

- The political ineffectiveness of CCI
- The fact that the Community had not developed from a loose network into a tighter and more intentional organisation
- Failure to support parents
- The neglect of the network as a resource for other forms of mutuality (e.g. 'green economy' style skill exchanges)
- The failure of the Community to grow numerically
- An excessive emphasis on a positive culture (at least in theory)
- The lack of a World Community (in other words of a real Co-Counselling International)

Many of this last group of comments can be related back to the earlier ones, in the sense that the problems identified can be seen as the consequence of an inability to take decisions and the resultant organisational paralysis. The theory is static because there is no process for changing it and no machinery for implementing decisions once made. Likewise, an effective decision to support parents, promote skill exchanges or consider a political role would require some overall sense of priority and direction, built upon the achievement of real consensus within the membership and a real sense of legitimacy around decision making processes and their outcomes. As it is, new initiatives depend on the work of dedicated individuals and small groups who may be tempted to claim a representative status which is not borne out by the facts. The collective life of CCI, certainly in London, is clearly problematic.

Suggestions for the inquiry

Participants were first asked to make suggestions for inquiry topics in the questionnaire. This produced 4 suggestions for work on discharge, and 5 suggestions for looking at the relationship between co-counselling and the transpersonal, including one specific proposal for using co-counselling and meditation in tandem. There were also suggestions for working on co-counselling and intimacy, co-counselling and the use of other therapeutic methods, and for looking at the collective life of the Co-counselling Community.

When the replies to the questionnaire had been collated, each participant was sent a full set, asked to look at the interests and concerns which seemed to be coming through, and then to generate a possible inquiry agenda. This produced a total of 11 possible agenda items, of which 4 were suggested by more than one person:

Aspects of co-counselling and the spiritual (8 people)
The role of discharge in co-counselling (6 people)
Interpersonal and group processes in co-counselling (4 people)
The role of free attention in co-counselling (2 people)
Bodywork in co-counselling
Celebration in the co-counselling culture
Co-counselling and ritual
Community development
Intimacy
Leadership in Co-counselling
New methods in co-counselling

All of this feedback was given to inquiry members and used as a background in the process which generated the actual agenda on Friday evening. The final list was presented to the group for reconsideration on Saturday morning:

FREE ATTENTION

THE DISCHARGE PROCESS

AS HEALING

AS ALTERED STATE

COMBINING SESSIONS AND MEDITATION

THE GROUP LEVEL

1. UNITY/SEPARATION
2. CUTTING THE CRAP
3. INTIMACY AND INTENSITY
4. GROUP MIND

CO-CO COMMUNITY AND CO-CO CULTURE

The inquiry group worked through the topics in roughly the order listed. The whole of the first day was spent looking at free attention and the whole of the second day exploring discharge. Both topics were covered in a way that kept the possible relationship between co-counselling and meditation in mind, though in the event there was no long session which combined co-counselling and meditation as a working method. Given the choice to prioritise the work on free attention and discharge, there was no time to work on the group and Community issues also listed in the agenda.

The process of refining the inquiry agenda is worth a little reflection. Two major concerns are evident from the beginning: the desire to look at the role of discharge and the desire to look at the relationship between co-counselling and spiritual practices, chiefly meditation. Both of these issues are emphasised by a number of people at every stage of the agenda setting process and both find full expression in the inquiry process itself. As early as the original questionnaire, 3 people formulated specific propositions about discharge, in one case accompanied by a clear set of activities designed to test it. One person was already raising questions about co-counselling and ego-building which were reflected in the eventual investigation of discharge, and another had a fully formulated proposition and proposed set of activities on the relationship between co-counselling and meditation.

By contrast, the role of free attention was not mentioned as a possible inquiry topic in the original questionnaire replies, although it was one of the most frequently listed benefits of co-counselling. It was itemised by only 2 people in the written agenda setting exercise but after the preparatory evening had moved to the top of the list, taking priority over the group and Community issues which had been more frequently referred to at the early stages and still featured strongly in the final agenda. I think that there are 3 reasons for this:

1. The co-counsellors in the inquiry group placed a very high value on free attention – as a state in itself, as a resource for the client in sessions, and as an approach to the co-counselling role which honours the peer principle and the idea of the client-in-charge. Neglecting to look at free attention in the inquiry would be like ignoring the keystone in the arch
2. The group were influenced somewhat by the model of the inquiry as an experimental process – as a pastiche of physical science. In terms of testing a proposition, the topic of free attention appeared to be relatively manageable. It offered the possibility of observing behavioural changes over a short period of time. Worries about CCI as a Community, however widespread, could only be looked at through the reported experience of group members in Community settings and this was perceived to be a lesser form of evidence
3. Work on interpersonal and group processes within the inquiry would have involved living dangerously. The group building process on the Friday evening was left off the record as a deliberate decision. The issue of safety for group members took priority over the potential value of this data to the research. However, it can be said that the Friday group did do some work on group and interpersonal processes and identified a potential for further exploration. On 2 occasions during the main inquiry the possibility of returning to this theme was

discussed (though not in relation to any inquiry proposition) and rejected in favour of continued work on the main inquiry themes. The result is that the inquiry group went some way towards addressing the whole of its agenda around individual co-counselling work, but did nothing to address collective issues at either group or Community level.

CHAPTER FIVE: INQUIRY INTO FREE ATTENTION

Refining the concept

The inquiry into free attention provided the main business of Saturday. A period of about 45 minutes was taken up, first in refining the concept and generating a testable proposition (33 minutes) and then in devising the exercises to test it (12 minutes). A simple definition of free attention, presented in my own notes for Fundamentals' students, reads as follows:

"<u>Free attention</u> Developing, as counsellors, listening skills with which we may fully hear and support our clients. Learning to avoid the distraction of thinking about what a client is saying, or the restimulation of being distressed by the client's material. Visually focusing on the client throughout the session and holding full eye contact when the client chooses it" (Nichol, 1985).

Formally, free attention operates in 2 ways. The specific 'free attention' contract means that counsellors offer silent listening and support only. They make no other interventions during the session (unless the client asks for a 'normal' contract, where the counsellor makes sparing interventions, or an 'intensive' contract, where the counsellor is more active. Contract changes are at the discretion of the client.) However, free attention is also assumed to be the underlying quality of relationship with clients even in other contracts. It is characterised by unconditional positive regard, attention given essentially to the person and their psychosomatic process rather than their story-telling, freedom from distraction and restimulation on the part of the counsellor and availability of eye contact.

Many members of the group deemed free attention to be a tool of great power. Michele recalled a time when she had given another woman free attention outside a co-counselling context: "I gave her what I thought was average free attention, you know, like run-of-the-mill, and the feedback I got from that woman all week was that never, never, never in her whole life had she felt listened to in that way … It was actually like a revelation, *she heard herself,* she had an experience beyond any listening experience she'd ever had. And I don't think that it was particularly just me, I think it was very much, you know, the quality of the free attention that we give". Alan had had a similar kind of experience: "I remember after my first fundamentals, going to a social club and somebody coming up to me, telling me the most intimate things about herself. She'd somehow, maybe unconsciously, realised that I was available for that kind of thing, I don't know why, and that happened 2 or 3 times. People would sit down next to me and start telling me about their lives … What was I putting out that these people were picking up on?"

Martin offered a visual metaphor to explain this process, likening free attention to a mirror: "the more highly polished the mirror is, the more the light comes back to its source." The counsellor is seen as coming from a position outside both their own self-preoccupation and preoccupation with the client's material: as a mirror, they reflect the light rather than absorbing it. The consequence was seen to be a profound form of enablement: "what's coming up for me is that it's seen to be to do with enabling communication. I'm recalling an occasion when somebody who I'd visited a number of times over the years was unable to communicate, unable to speak and I, on this occasion just gave free attention and we had the deepest communication we'd ever had … there's an enablement for the client to express more, with more facility, in whatever mode, given free attention" (Evelyn).

Michele said that the Chinese character for 'to listen' was created out of 5 signs: you, I, hear, undivided attention and heart. Perhaps free attention, fully understood, was a state akin to meditation, having elements of both detachment and compassion. Several members of the group thought that there was some relationship and that meditation itself could be understood as a kind of internal free attention. James wanted to distinguish 2 kinds of free attention: "one would be, I think, what we would ordinarily call free attention, I'm listening to you, I'm listening to you and I'm pushing all my own stuff away and I'm engaging with your process … the other would be kind of a more Zen thing where I'm not even engaging with your process, I'm just very present and I'm coming back to you as my focus instead of my breath". Michele also made distinctions within free attention, but in a different way: "there are times when I know that my free attention comes from the heart, that level of compassion, like the person is a person beyond who they are and it doesn't matter whether I like the person or not … when I'm in that state of total acceptance, you know, I'm not always giving that sort of free attention but sometimes I can achieve it". She wanted a way of finding out if clients really noticed a difference.

Jet commented that "it's sort of similar to Rogerian stuff that's like non-judgemental, basic acceptance or whatever the 3 things are", but others thought of co-counselling attention as unique, because based on a culture that was not only client-centred but client-directed (Peter), and because the more active client-counsellor relationship in other schools gave counsellors the responsibility of being present for their clients in a perhaps more calculating way (Martin). However, group members did feel that there was some mutuality even in the free attention contract, although counsellors make no interventions and their clients do not interact with them. "When I'm giving good attention, the person who is working or who is enabled with me is actually giving me something, and there's a feeling I get from that actual giving of attention that enriches my experience" (Michael). There are also times when free attention can spontaneously become a silent exchange: "there are many times when I have sat there with a counsellor for 5 or 10 minutes … giving me the space to be able to start" (Suniiti).

During the period of discussion various attempts were made to generate a proposition. The proposition arrived at was:

It is possible to identify different qualities of free attention that are enabling to the client in different ways.

The proposition was arrived at relatively early, and although the group thought that it needed refinement, it proved remarkably stubborn. Eventually it was decided to concentrate on devising exercises which would enable the group to review and refine the group after experiential testing.

Entering the experience

The proposition and the main outline of the exercises had been decided by the time of the first (10 minutes) break in the inquiry, 45 minutes after the discussion on free attention began. After the break, another 20 minutes were spent on refining and checking out the exercises, deciding how many people should be involved in doing them and in choosing roles.

This process revealed the group's understanding, at this early stage of the process, of the meaning of co-operative inquiry. There is a clear sense of the exercise cycle as an experiment designed to establish truths about free attention, rather than a heuristic device providing a structure for open exploration. Martin voiced this perception early on, during the initial formulation of the proposition, by saying: "I'd have thought that the proposition needs to be something we can test … so I can think of a few propositions that are, you know, grandiose, and I'm not sure how I'd test them". This sense is reinforced by the decision, when the exercises were set up, to split the group into 2 pairs working experientially and 5 observers. The experience of the people working would be checked out by another set of people looking at the process from the outside. The use of observers is itself not unusual in co-counselling. It is widely used in training contexts (Fundamentals, Further Skills, and Facilitator Training). It is also quite usual to have co-counselling sessions in 3's in which the role of the third person is that of observer, normally with specific permission to offer feedback on aspects of a session. So the procedure was not counter-cultural to co-counselling or likely to be threatening or state altering in any way to the 4 experienced co-counsellors who were working. Nonetheless the decision to have a subject/observer split represents an obvious concession to the style of conventional science.

It was further decided that each pair would have one person who took the role of client and one person who took the role of counsellor for the duration of the work. The exercises comprised a series of 8 consecutive 3 minute sessions requiring the counsellor and the client to try out different states of attention. Each client then had another 3 minute session with the whole group. Working time was therefore 30 minutes. In practice the whole cycle lasted for 38. The exercises were:

- *A conventional free attention contract* in which the client would use the silent free attention of the counsellor to work on 'what's on top' – any distresses or anxieties which might be in the forefront of the client's consciousness – the object being to clear them through a discharge process to attain a distress-free experience of the present with a chosen, rather than driven, form of awareness. This is a typical piece of work at the beginning of a workshop or session and in a sense represented the baseline of free attention work: all of the other activities involved variations

- *A session in which counsellors gave poor attention* This was designed to test the difference for the client between the presence and absence of free attention in the particular circumstances of a calculated withdrawal. The rationale was that if the client found it more difficult to work, the significance of free attention as a resource would be indicated
- *A session, with good free attention, preceded by a period of meditation* To an extent the meditation was designed to break the bad free attention and restore rapport in the client-counsellor relationship through a shared activity that did not involve interaction. More importantly, it was intended to find out whether a free attention session preceded by a period of meditation ws different from one which was not. It was hypothesised by some members of the group that the character of 'what's on top' work might be subtly changed at the level both of process and of content
- *A session in which counsellors closed their eyes followed by a session in which clients shut their eyes* These were designed to test the visual component of free attention. How important was it?
- *A session in which clients and counsellors gave each other free attention and shared passing thoughts followed by a session of silent mutual free attention*, *ending in a short period of feedback between clients and counsellors* This was designed to test any changes in the relationship within the pairs when the client/counsellor contract was dissolved and the activity was fully mutual. If the experience of free attention improved, then the co-counselling relationship might be construed as limiting the context of free attention
- *Two sessions (one for each client) in which clients received silent free attention from the whole group* These were designed to test the power of group, as opposed to individual, free attention

The two pairs were Evelyn (counsellor) with Michele (client) and Suniiti (counsellor) with Alan (client). Martin acted as stage manager and time keeper. Both clients moved swiftly into light discharge work; both experienced difficulties through the withdrawal;

each had a different type of session after meditating. Experiences of the loss of eye contact, and of mutuality, varied – although both clients reported the silent mutual free attention experience as the most pleasurable of al the exercises. Each found that the experience of group free attention differed from that of individual free attention. The full responses of both participants and observers are reported below.

On completion of the work, there was a short period of instant feedback from the participants, chiefly the clients. The group then broke for a shared lunch. Including time taken for the opening circle, initial checking out of group members, checking out of inquiry rules and deciding what to work on, the morning session had lasted approximately 2 hours and 30 minutes.

Reviewing the experience: what was observed

Lunchtime on both the inquiry days created a discontinuity in the process. A sharing at the beginning of the afternoon session revealed comments like "dropped down to my stomach", "less centred", "not as connected", "a bit sleepy, a bit sniffly, a bit windy", "I'd like to curl up in a little ball" and "what did I do to feel so knackered?" The group decided to sit in meditation for ten minutes before beginning the review processes of the morning's exercises. The original proposition was then read out, and the 2 clients from the morning's experiential work were asked about its plausibility to them. Had they experienced different types of free attention? Had they been enabled in different ways? The responses were broadly confirmatory: "There did seem to be differences in the degree of facility with different types of free attention" (Alan) and "I can identify different states that I went through, or different ways of working, different gears of working, working on … different levels of experiences, yes" (Michele).

The next step was a round of feedback from observers – the intention being for them to confine themselves to what they saw rather than what they thought, though the distinction proved hard to maintain in practice. A common observation concerned the different ways in which the 2 pairs worked. One pair (Evelyn and Michele) were in close physical contact, holding hands and arms and posturally mirroring, bending towards each other and with a level eye contact. Alan and Suniiti were not in physical contact. Alan was kneeling up and Suniiti was sitting cross-legged. This meant that Suniiti had to look up to make eye contact. They also sat further apart than the other pair. Group members wondered whether this accounted for some of the perceived differences in the experiences that the two clients were having, especially during the period of bad attention in the second exercise and later, when the counsellors closed their eyes.

"There seemed to be a different way the energy flowed … there were obviously changes between Evelyn and Michele and at the same time there was always this physical contact … there wasn't as much extremes … it seemed to flow forwards … there was more change of energy I sensed, in the other pair … more fighting or something" (Peter).

"Although Evelyn as counsellor had her eyes shut, the presence was still there" (James).

"I thought maybe Alan was speaking a bit louder to get Suniiti to open her eyes, and the Evelyn was going for more body contact with Evelyn" (Jet).

"I perceived it was a different experience when the quality of attention was different, that was quite clear. That it had an effect on both clients but that the depth, the extremes of difference seemed to be less for Michele where there was the physical contact, so in some ways though the attention was gone for that particular exercise, there still seemed to be a feeling that the counsellor was still there" (Michael).

"I got a feeling, as I was closest to Alan; I had a feeling of Alan really struggling to get attention back, to some extent, working to get it" (Martin).

The comments of observer did not however, always match the experience of participants. Of the time when Evelyn withdrew her attention from Michele, James said "the absence of attention made a lot of difference, albeit subtle". Evelyn said, "I'd just been restimulated by something in your material and went off … into my head … (then) I got hot, and I could have done that while still giving free attention but in the act I gave attention to the zip, and it wouldn't have distracted if I'd been giving free attention". Michele's response was totally different: "my experience was so different from what the observer observed or what you said, is when you said you gave me poor free attention I thought the signal was so GROSS, in terms of so POUF! That I'm really surprised when people say it was subtle … I noticed you zipping and looking away … it was like a brick in the face". Interestingly, the closing of the counsellor's eyes did not produce a similar sense of violation – rather it was a stimulus to a therapeutic use of time. "The eyes closed, that was for me very powerful and I, your eyes closed it was very, it was a struggle to still believe you are still here with your eyes closed, so I got into death and loss and going away".

The other main point picked up in general observation was that the session of good free attention following a short meditation seemed different to the free attention session at the beginning.

"When both pairs moved into a period of conventional free attention after a period of mindfulness, that it was largely non-verbal … there wasn't a sense of launching into it as soon as the free attention was there. There was a real sense for me of the client still being with their own process … " (Martin).

"After the meditation time the quality definitely felt different, I suppose an improved, an improved quality" (Jet).

"I was near you and I perceived you moving into something different, it may have been a new kind of rapport that you had, with that silence and emptiness restimulating something … and being enabling in that sort of backhanded way, and it may have been enabling in some other way and I have no way of knowing which, and certainly it brought in something new and more profound in terms of your own material which you had been fixing in your session" (James).

"My voice changed" (Alan)

Reviewing the experience: reflections on the process

The first reflections picked up on some limitations in the design of the exercises. Deliberately giving bad free attention was seen as a contrived activity unlike either a natural lapse by a counsellor or poor attention in other contexts. Furthermore, the order of the exercises was announced and clients knew what to expect. The shutting of eyes was also perceived as a contrivance, though it did give rise to a discussion about working with non-sighted counsellors and counselling on the telephone. The difference seemed to be that shutting eyes in an exercise was an unnatural procedure and therefore unlike the other situations where people would be making the best of the resources they had – which might well include an enhancement of other senses. Evelyn said that, when telephone counselling, she closed her eyes and lay on the floor as the best way of tuning into the sensory input that was available.

The other problem was the way in which a succession of exercises followed on from each other. The depth of rapport achieved in an exercise like the mutual free attention work as opposed to a conventional free attention session *might* be due to the nature of the activities; it could as easily be due to the fact that it was late in the programme and had the benefit of partners who had been working together for some time. There was no way of separating the individual effects of the exercises from the cumulative ones.

There was a question mark about the first exercise in mutual free attention, the one with verbal exchange. In abolishing the distinction between client and counsellor, some people said that it lost both the benefits and limitations of these roles. The loss of boundaries opened the way both for a growth in intimacy and for restimulation, collusive mutual addiction and abuse. Martin as observer of a (beneficial) session, thought that it sometimes steered toward dialogue and the interpersonal, and sometimes towards "shared monologues of internal process".

The exercise most enjoyed by the participants was the one involving the giving of mutual free attention in silence.

"My favourite out of all of them … it felt like we were both getting what we needed" (Suniiti).

"It felt like transcending the whole lot, able to go, yet again there was another shift, there is … that was probably the most powerful" (Michele).

"It felt very nourishing; it felt like a bit of a holiday from myself" (Alan).

“I felt just completely surprised and sort of overwhelmed by this great richness of feeling that suddenly came and I just wasn’t expecting it to happen. It was just transforming” (Evelyn).

Several observers admitted to a sense of envy whilst watching this exercise; there was a sense that, like short meditations, it could be built into the structure of co-counselling as an activity that might precede or follow sessional work to enhance the quality of attention and relationship between client and counsellor. The group agreed that everybody should have the chance to participate in such an exercise before the end of the day.

The final exercises were those in which each client received attention from the whole group. Both clients confirmed their sense of an enhanced enabling power; each had in fact been seen to operate at a more actively somatic level (Michele in discharge, Alan through bodywork techniques). They also agreed that they had picked up different ‘flavours’ of attention from different members of the group. And although there is a co-counselling belief that any co-counsellor can give the same quality of attention to every other co-counsellor, both clients confirmed that for them at least this is not quite true. “It feels risky but I’d like to say I’d love to explore this in this group. It is what makes me, you know, just, Mmm! go to one person” (Michele). “Follow your energy connection to individuals … follow what energy line happens to be around” (Alan).

Drawing conclusions

The full review of the morning’s exercises took an hour and 12 minutes. There followed a 15 minute break for games before the group returned to consider its conclusions about free attention. The group reminded itself of the original proposition:

It is possible to identify different qualities of free attention that are enabling to the client in different ways.

There was general agreement that the baseline free attention session that began the experiential work had been successful. Both clients had used their counsellor’s attention to work and to get into discharge. Moreover, the effects of the withdrawal of that attention had been so marked, especially in one case, that in spite of the crudity of the exercise its results were seen as significant. If the loss of attention had meant so much, then its earlier presence must have had a real value.

It was agreed that the free attention session following the period of meditation had a different quality to the original one, as if something had been added. There were several possible reasons for this. The client might have changed through their own meditation; the counsellor might be offering a different quality of free attention; counsellor and client might be in closer rapport because of the shared activity of meditation. All of these things might be true. But although it was not possible to say that the counsellor's attention offered a different kind of enablement, it was possible to say that the process as a whole did. Meditation before a free attention session had enabled the clients in a distinctive way.

The session where the counsellors' eyes were closed received more comment than the sessions in which the clients' eyes were closed. The exercise was felt to be artificial, but it stimulated discussion about the use of sensory channels other than sight. It seemed clear that the closing of the counsellors' eyes might have value as a kind of provocative intervention, especially if the client was still receiving the assurance of support through physical contact. An apparent absence at some level (as opposed to the real absence previously discussed) might be enabling as trigger. The group felt that the idea warranted further testing.

Mutual free attention was seen as outside of co-counselling. Mutual free attention with permission to express thoughts was seen as both exciting and as potentially dangerous. It had the power to enable both intimacy and abuse. In terms of the overall inquiry topic, the boundaries of co-counselling, with the defined roles of counsellor and client, could be thought of in this context either as a limitation (inhibition) or as a benefit (protection). But it was clear that this form of free attention had a quality that could enable interpersonal exchange, the growth of intimacy or shared present time awareness.

Mutual free attention without words, whilst also outside co-counselling, was seen as more compatible with the tradition and, like meditation, something that could be assimilated into the culture. All participants found it a profoundly healing experience with a character unlike any of the other exercises. Quite clearly, it was a quality of free attention which enabled something different to the free attention in session work.

Group attention was confirmed as especially powerful compared to individual attention, capable of enabling dynamic forms of work.

Finally, it was agreed that different individuals offered different qualities of attention both because of who they were and because of their style. Free attention differed according to whether it was accompanied by physical contact, whether the counsellor was deadpan or facially mobile and so on. The term 'free attention' was recognised as softer than it had seemed. The group felt that the proposition had withstood scrutiny and could be allowed to stand, but the day's work also began to raise questions about the inquiry process itself and its validity. What did it mean that the proposition could be allowed to stand? There was some slightly nervous dialogue about the validity of the specific tests:

James: "There was a lot of tactile communication between Evelyn and Michele along with their postural matching and so on, so there was a lot that didn't work in the same way with the other pair. Of course we don't know from direct experience whether the different visual things going on had a different effect … when there was a major tactile communication and when there wasn't, but unfortunately the two pairs do not resemble each other in every other respect [laughter]. What we need are 2 sets of twins with the equivalent experience of co-counselling doing it."

Alan: "Double-bind trial."

James: "But a question was raised whether it, you know … "

Michele: "What have we learned? Is it?"

This question was never really answered in its own terms, perhaps because the group was beginning to suspect that it couldn't be. Instead there was a general agreement within the group that free attention had been shown to work and that it had been established as having a number of variant forms depending on the specific interaction between people and the context within which they were functioning.

The group did have an area of unfinished business. It had wanted to establish the connection between free attention and two related ideas, but had not found the time or the appropriate means for doing so. The first of these ideas was ‘rapport’. The suggestion was that the quality of free attention could be enhanced by a specific rapport building approach which uses close behavioural matching – including physiological mirroring (posture, synchronised breathing) and shared activity – to create a powerful somatic empathy. Some group members had experience of a therapeutic technology, NLP, which sets out to cultivate this state.

‘Mindfulness’ is that complete awareness in and of the moment which certain schools of meditation attempt to generate. Whilst acknowledging and accepting their distractions, practitioners of mindfulness meditation are trained to bring themselves back to a full presence in the here and now, using a specific focus like the breath. Again, there was experience of working with these traditions within the group. Some group members believed that the quality of free attention emerging from this practice with the client as the point of focus would have a special presence and authority. These thoughts, however, were tentative speculations and not followed up.

The group ended the afternoon session with a silent free attention exercise in pairs, with private feedback in the pairs, followed by a closing circle. The consideration of conclusions had taken 35 minutes; the whole afternoon session was 2 hours and 41 minutes.

CHAPTER SIX: INQUIRY INTO DISCHARGE

Setting the agenda

By Sunday morning the group had settled into its customs and it used the first 20 minutes on an opening circle and a group meditation. It had already been agreed that the inquiry subject of the day was discharge. But the discussion began with an open agenda and a particular concern to let group members check out their personal needs. It was recognised that people had had little time on the previous day to get their personal needs met, and that at one point the group had decided to stick to the inquiry agenda rather than attending to its own process and interpersonal issues. Sunday morning could be used as an opportunity to polish the group mirror.

In the event the group decided that it could combine personal needs with the inquiry. Everybody would get a chance to do co-counselling client work, either in the group or in pairs, and their work would be related back to a proposition about discharge. There was no move to undertake group process or interpersonal work as a separate exercise; people felt that they could work on any frustrations or hurts related to the group within their co-counselling sessions. Initially the feeling was that group work would be preferable but in the event paired work was chosen. Sessions would be 10 minutes each way. The inquiry proposition was formulated as:

Discharge is an effective psychosomatic process for coming into the present.

This proposition was therefore not concerned with the deepest potentials of discharge in healing early childhood trauma or acting as the catalyst for major transformational experiences. It was designed around a short piece of work aimed at clearing up emotional stresses and strains experienced in the here and now and allowing people to move on from them. ‘Present time’ is the co-counselling term for distress free awareness and interaction in the world, akin to free attention in its narrower context in the counselling role. It could be seen as a less pure or concentrated form of the meditator’s mindfulness – enough freedom from pre-occupation and anxiety to respond directly and awarely to the world around the person. Hence the reference to coming into the present.

Before the work could begin there was a brief clarification of the use of the word 'psychosomatic' in this context. It related to the principle that a true catharsis requires both a mental and a physical component. The mental component might be grief and the physical component might be sobbing. An experience of sobbing without any mental or imaginal reference would not be seen as cathartic or expected to have the same potential for changing the client's internal world. The word psychosomatic was included in the proposition to reinforce this point.

Group members checked out their own internal states before embarking on sessions.

"I'm feeling reasonably attentive. I've had a slight restimulation" (James).

"I'm not sparkling yet. I guess I've got some stuff to cut down there" (Evelyn).

"I'm fairly alert, but not as much as 10 minutes ago … my impatience could be with the group, you know" (Michele).

"I feel all over the place" (Jet).

"I feel a bit of a paradox. I'm feeling very present here but I wish I wasn't" (Suniiti).

"I'm feeling quite settled in a sort of quite low energy plane, I'd quite like to get off that" (Alan).

"There are things going on outside that are restimulating me a bit around grief, and I think I need to clear some of that to get my attention here" (Michael).

The time taken from the end of the meditation sitting to the beginning of the co-counselling session was 30 minutes.

Changing energy, changing state

The actual sessions were 10 minutes each was and the group resumed after 25 minutes in all, beginning with a feedback round about how everybody was feeling post-session.

“Well I’m certainly feeling more present and vibrant and alive, and more in body” (Evelyn).

“I didn’t do any discharge and I feel just as present” (Suniiti).

“I’m kind of feeling better, and I wasn’t feeling bad earlier, I do feel more here and I did have a fair discharging session” (Martin).

“I feel physically mobilised, and I have a sense of more, a more solid sense of being here … in terms of present time, I’m unclear, a little bit unclear about vocabulary” (James).

“I feel more energised physically … I feel quite present and at the same time a bit spacey” (Alan).

“I feel different, better, marginally … I’m not sure how much more in the present, in fact it’s the opposite for me, now” (Michele).

“Well I cried my eyes out which is what I needed to do … I do feel kind of relieved and cleared … I can also feel my attention hanging on to strands of what I worked on … but I definitely feel more ready for anything that happens today or less resistant” (Jet).

7 of the 8 participants offered feedback on their sessions: 6 of these had done discharge work, all of whom reported that they felt better in some way. But in terms of the proposition the message was unclear. 2 people said that they were, respectively, more present and more here. Another said that he was simultaneously more present and more spacey – a statement with which I personally experience some difficulty because in my definitions these terms contradict each other. My own statement as a participant was that I felt “a more solid sense of being here” it didn’t seem quite the present time experience as I understand it. One person felt a greater readiness to participate in the group whilst having an immediate preoccupation with insights gained from the session. One participant made a clear statement that she was less in the present after discharge.

The remaining person to give feedback had said that she was present before the session, did not discharge during the session, and remained present afterwards. There is a problem here in terms of co-counselling theory. The pre-session statement was that she was fully present whilst wishing she wasn't. Being in one place whilst wanting to be somewhere else would, in co-counselling terms, be considered a distressed state. Present time, in co-counselling theory, is a distress-free state. So Suniiti is speaking from a divergent understanding of what it is to be present. Such understandings can be found in spiritual traditions that cultivate a detached acceptance of sensory and mental experience: in such a belief system, the individual does not need to work on the distress, they need only to find a place outside or perhaps, rather, beyond it. Thus Suniiti says that she is present and quite congruently, in terms of her beliefs, chooses not to discharge.

The exercise therefore demonstrated that there were clear benefits in discharge work for the 6 people who both did it and talked about it afterwards, albeit marginal for 2 of them. The benefits, other than accessing a present-time state, often seemed to manifest in the body – "vibrant and alive, more in body", "physically mobilised", "energised physically", "relieved and cleared". The specific issue about coming into the present was more problematic, and it seems likely that the problem has something to do with the idea of the 'present' rather than the limitations of discharge work. A concept like 'present time awareness' reaches into the heart of subjective experience. People have no choice but to conceptualise and recognise it in their own unique ways. Even when using the same words and sharing common beliefs, they will be having different experiences. And at least for most people, present time is not their normal state. Co-counselling is not helping people to move from unusual states of distress to re-assuring states of normality. It is, rather, enabling them to move from normal states of distress to unusual states of alertness. It may be that, collectively, we have insufficient experience of these to generate a sufficient consensus about how to talk about them.

Distinction within discharge

Despite some confusion about the nature of the internal changes experienced, there was a very clear shift in the external behaviour of the group, certainly at the collective level. I felt it strongly at the time in my facilitator role, and it comes across very clearly in the tapes. For the last part of the morning, the group entered a very active period, working animatedly for an hour and 45 minutes without any break between the return from the sessions work until lunch. People talked faster, their voices were slightly louder and in some cases higher pitches and they interrupted more. It was during this time that the inquiry mutated from an exclusive concern with the proposition-test-review cycle and gained the courage to follow its slightly more discursive instincts. To the extent that coming into the present could be equated with a more energised engagement with the task in hand, the proposition that

Discharge is an effective psychosomatic process for coming into the present

is certainly plausible, since the main change in the group had been the discharge work carried out by most of its members.

However the actual content of the review process moved the group away from the proposition and on to the nature of discharge. The new train of thought was initiated by Michele:

"OK what I experience, what I wanted to challenge, how did you know there was discharge? … I think I did what I call 'maintenance discharge', questioning if it was real discharge, so I mean I can shout and express anger, the level at which I express it I'm questioning – is that discharge? It is certainly not what I call catharsis, and it did not feel like the healing catharsis that I look for."

Alan suggested that just as there were different modes and levels of free attention, the same might be true of discharge. Major distress patterns were lodged deep in the unconscious and getting at them was like blind spear fishing: "You've got a vague idea where the fish is and you sort of point the spear gun and TCHOOO! [spear gun noises] the fish explodes in the subconscious and there's this tremendous release of energy. And that sort of feels very deep and healing … [remembering a specific occasion] … the fish exploded and I felt these waves of energy rolling up my body. And I don't know what had triggered that … except that I'd had a lot of mental and emotional pain for several days before. And it was like the catharsis seemed to come almost out of the cells of my body."

James, Martin and Evelyn welcomed the concept of maintenance discharge. Jet endorsed it, but added the caveat "I wanted to say that I'm glad you said something about levels, 'cos I feel like, OK, it might have been housekeeping stuff that I was dealing with but it felt very profound as well". Michael found the talk of different levels judgemental. "I'm having some difficulty with the talk about different types of discharge and their depth, implying to me that if I'm only having a maintenance discharge then I'm not working deeply … all my issues that I discharge most on, I only get into a small amount of discharge on them, because sometimes I feel it would be too much to handle … and I'll just lose myself, and I think my balance of attention comes into that".

This point was echoed by Suniiti. What happened, in profound catharsis, when the individual experiencing it lost control? Where did the balance of attention go? Michael reminded the group that in co-counselling the idea of maintaining a 'balance of attention' whilst working was fundamental. He recalled a time when he had lost himself and been totally reliant on his partner to bring him back "with cold water and things like that, I was so deep in it I had lost myself. And there wasn't even the thought, 'I've lost myself', I'd just gone". Was the group saying that true cathartic healing involved going beyond the safety of the co-counselling contract and the principle of client direction?

This approach was challenged by Michele, who objected to the idea of 'loss of control'. Her experience of deep catharsis was where her balance of attention was at its best, so much present that the free attention she had available to hold her catharsis was immense. She could not do such work without that balance. Evelyn said that at times of profound discharge she lost, not control, but herself. She had literally had the experience of being "beside herself" and observing the discharge and that was "exquisite". She thought that this was a going beyond the ego, a gain rather than loss, though she also said that the fear and resistance around doing it meant that only with some huge trigger would she get to that point. She questioned whether Michael might not have gone through the experience and out the other side had he not been brought back from it. She recalled her experience of labour, where she would have liked to be brought back from it but had no choice. James wondered whether the capacity for giving birth might make women more open to transformative catharsis than men.

There was clearly no group consensus about Alan's 'spear fishing' concept, though there was an agreement to distinguish maintenance discharge as one form of discharge among others. The group needed to find a way of exploring these distinctions further, and to do that it needed to refocus away from the original proposition, that

Discharge is an effective psychosomatic process for coming into the present.

Michele made a statement about the proposition which somehow provided the signal to move on to the next cycle – the consideration of another proposition that would take the group forward. The concept of present time awareness adopted by Michele is pragmatic and avoids the metaphysics of 'altered states'.

"Again, it speaks to me very very clear that the present we are talking of, if we are making a general statement that we've proved it as being right by saying that discharge, some forms of discharge, are totally effective in bringing back to the present, meaning being functional in the present, active, happy, maybe, in daily life."

With this summation the group ended its consideration of the first proposition of the day.

Discharge and its effects: further reflections

It now became possible to ask new questions and to consider new tests. If the group agreed that the previous work had been 'maintenance discharge' and that maintenance discharge tended to bring people into the present in the sense of becoming more functional and alive, then what was the effect of other kinds of discharge?

James introduced the idea of 'abundant time' and found a passage from a work which some people had used in preparation for the inquiry (Heron 1977, 46). He read out the key passage:

"Living in abundant time is more than living in present time. It is possible to be very here and now in terms of immediate sensory awareness yet to be dissociated from past and future. Living in abundant time means being aware of what is present, with an openness to and a sense of the re-evaluated past, and with an openness to and a sense of the emergent possibilities that are pouring into the present … The present lived out of the future through a restructuring insight into the past – some such aphorism as this comes close to the concept of living in abundant time."

Martin talked of "actualising our imaginations" and James agreed, saying that release from the distortions of the past helped to make that possible. In his view, co-counselling and spiritual traditions acted together to support such a development. Michele spoke of "the Zen of children, very young … to be completely in the universe and in ourselves, that's what co-counselling is, I agree, aiming at: to be living in that flexibility most of the time." A number of people thought that profoundly cathartic episodes were a way of accessing such a state.

Several also recalled that for all the earlier talk and concern about more advanced levels of work, their own experiences of this kind had tended to come early in their co-counselling careers rather than as a product of increasing maturity or skill in using the method. Indeed, novelty and innocence might be the key: participants saw parallels with other experiences like orgasm and meditation. "And for me, the first 10 day meditation retreat, where mountains seemed to move, and many retreats later I've not had the same sorts of experience as I had the first time. And there seems to be that thing like the first time I'm touched by something new it's profound" (Martin).

James referred to Sue's Questionnaire response, in which she had talked of the diminishing returns of discharge. Co-counselling provided a transformative education in the acceptance and management of feelings. The explosive quality of the experience diminished as the lesson was absorbed and became part of a new kind of normality for the individual. That being the case, the need for actual co-counselling work on a regular basis was time-limited, though it could still be called on at times of exceptional emotional difficulty. The implication here is that co-counselling practice does not open the door to the actualisation of unlimited potential; it has a more limited role in changing the way in which negative feelings are identified and managed. The suggested mechanism of the change is two-fold: the practice of the method over the limited period in which it remains truly productive, and a permanent internal restructuring generated through the overall learning process. Consequently, in order to capitalise on the personal gain generated by an enhanced competence in the management of distress, the individual needs to find other ways of continuing on their developmental path. This in turn implies that the distinction between therapy and development is after all a useful one. Co-counselling on this reading becomes a successful therapy for some purposes at some times. It is not by itself a vehicle for the continuing development of the whole person.

Michael thought that as discharge work on early hurts progressed, those hurts were no longer trapped in the psyche to the same degree and therefore there was less distress to work with. Some people felt that maintenance discharge could become repetitive and addictive (in which case should it be labelled as something different?) but that in practice this could be hard to distinguish from steady and effective work except in its results over an extended period of time. Alan took the discussion in a new direction, the one that ultimately led to the next proposition, by restating the problem in different terms:

“My devil says that the law of diminishing returns applies to any therapeutic technique because the ego becomes immune to it.”

‘Ego’ is not a term of art within co-counselling, though most co-counsellors are familiar with it from one source or another. The classic definition flows from Freud’s division of the psyche into id, ego and superego. The id is the unconscious world of the libido, allegedly described by Freud himself as “a cauldron of seething excitement” (Rowan 1976, 174). The ego is the socialised adult personality, the world of thinking and conscious identity. The superego is the location of conscience and altruism. Spiritual disciplines, especially Buddhism and other eastern philosophies, but also Christian mysticism and hermetic traditions in the west, have linked the Freudian understanding of the ego to their own traditional ideas of self. They have drawn attention to its provisional and manufactured nature – in eastern language as an illusion, in western language as a limiting construct. The sense is that it creates an attachment to thinking and an impoverished, over-filtered experience of space, time and sensory data. This binds people to a rigid, anxious and isolated self-sense and thereby inhibits the full evolution (and celebration) of consciousness. The inquiry group, whilst not sharing identical understandings of this concept or the value of egoic experience, had a sufficient commonality to have a mutually intelligible discussion and arrive at a proposition in which ‘ego’ is a key word.

Suniiti made a number of strong statements to the effect that her own developmental path was about challenging the ego, reaching a place of lucidity where the illusory quality of ego was revealed and a greater spiritual personality allowed to blossom. Her concern was that co-counselling discharge work reinforced the ego and went counter to her goal:

"I challenge myself for maintenance discharge, and I said in my session that I didn't want to do it, I didn't see the value of it any more, because it feels like ego building, it really does, and I've been keeping a diary of my sessions for 2 years … I'm building the ego up and it's the ego itself that's creating more distress that means I'm going to do more discharge which means that the ego will get more substance … it really feels that you can transcend all that stuff completely, you don't need to get into, I mean some of the greatest saints that I read about in the world had dreadful lives, completely confused, near to nervous breakdown and they got breakthrough without doing in to any kind of cathartic work."

Michele recognised the point that Suniiti was making, and recalled a point made by the Maharishi when she was learning Transcendental Meditation to the effect that, when you sweep a room, you don't need to look through the rubbish, which she took to be his comment on therapy. But she disagreed. She felt that co-counselling and meditation worked well together. She also owned a strong reaction to the word 'saint', probably caused by her Catholic upbringing. "Who wants to be a saint anyway?" She thought that there could be a distressed sanctity, completely denying the body and life. And although she wanted to go beyond the ego, she wanted to keep the ego as a friend. Evelyn quoted some advice from Ram Dass to the effect that human beings should take the curriculum and be human: we weren't here to be saints but to live out our full humanity.

Martin and Alan both thought that people needed a strong ego before reaching out to transcendence. Both thought that co-counselling and meditation were complementary. James found the ego a valuable construct. He lived there for most of the time. He thought that transcendence worked dialectically. The higher terms should incorporate the lower. The ego stage was a necessary development stage for the human being, a stage we grow into and then have the potential to grow beyond. He added that we didn't get back to being like young children, but began to access something new.

Michael noted the frequent references to meditation and wondered about tying them into the inquiry. If meditation fitted into co-counselling it enhanced the possible benefits. If it was something apart and in contradiction to co-counselling, then that might be seen as a limitation of co-counselling as a personal development method. Despite her reservations about maintenance discharge, Suniiti made the first attempt to formulate a proposition, namely, that a profound catharsis could dissolve the mistaken thought that was ego. These 2 contributions inspired a succession of attempts to refine a proposition that was testable, mostly hypothesising that discharge work and meditation together could confront a fundamental distress, which was seen to be embedded in egoic identity.

The group found great difficulty in finding the right words for a testable proposition. The first version would have been about discharging a concept, which made no sense in anybody's map of consciousness. Eventually, frustrations were eased when James initiated a discussion which partially reframed the aims, or at any rate the methods, of the inquiry. This discussion is reported more fully in Chapter 7 below. In essence it turned on the insight that the attempt to be rigorous in experiential inquiry by adopting a quasi-experimental approach was becoming an impossible constraint, one that could only limit and impoverish the scope of the inquiry whilst failing also to be valid in its own narrow terms. The solution adopted was that the group gave itself permission to work with a proposition that might be too difficult to test in the accepted sense, provided that the work stimulated and focused thinking about the issues – mapping the territory rather than verifying a hypothesis. After this, the work on a form of words flowed more easily, and the eventual proposition was:

A complementary process of co-counselling discharge and meditation/contemplation is a way to access a fundamental distress around identity/ego.

There was some doubt about whether access was the right word, because it didn't say anything about healing the distress or, indeed, creating changes of any kind. Nevertheless, group members expressed pleasure and excitement about the point that had been reached, and decided to leave the change of verb until the afternoon session when the experiential work would be carried out. Jet, who had not yet said much in the discussion, remarked: “I feel very excited by this, and also it feels like where I am and where I feel this weekend … I just feel, that I can’t believe that I’m with it and that I’ve not been let out”. Each of the participants confirmed their enthusiasm about the morning’s developments and, after a brief exchange about how to structure the afternoon, the group broke for lunch.

An awkward start

As on the previous day, the group returned to work after lunch with a sense of distance from the work of the morning. The energy and excitement around the final proposition had gone. A brief sharing followed by a 10 minute meditation failed to bring the group into inquiry mode, and so Michael led the group into a game which incorporated a song. 20 minutes into the afternoon session the proposition was read and there were some unsuccessful attempts to replace the word access – clear, annihilate, deal with discharge and transcend were all rejected. People admitted to no longer finding the proposition comprehensible, as though their levels of understanding had slipped.

Nonetheless, it was decided to go ahead with the programme. The format would be that of one, or, if time, 2 people working in the group, after a period of group ‘attunement’ followed by mindfulness meditation. At the end of this period, a participant would move into the centre of the circle as the spirit moved them, set up their contract with the group and work on the issues. There was also a strong suggestion, interpreted by some people as an agreement, that the client would intersperse period of discharge work with period of meditation and base their work around the question, ‘who am I?’, to which they would be invited to return at appropriate times throughout the session.

This is not what happened. The attunement (members of the group holding hands in silence and sensitising themselves to each other and the collective as a whole) began 37 minutes into the afternoon session. It was not guided and ran messily into the mindfulness sitting, an awkwardness that was discussed very briefly when the sitting ended. The group then had a short period of chanting and waited for someone to start working.

An unexpected session

James began talking in a fast and agitated way. He was in the centre because he felt pushed, pressed down on the neck and right shoulder where a considerable pain had built up during the attunement. He did not want to be there; he was devitalised and stuck, the worst possible state to start from. He was embarrassed about the whole thing. He asked for, and was given, a sick bucket. He began coughing, loosened his throat and jaw and began breathing. For 10 minutes periods of coughing, spitting and on 2 occasions, vomiting, were interspersed with remarks like "I'm feeling very unspiritual" and "I've done all this work and I'm going to prove it all wrong … it's all nonsense, this … they should pass a law against this … it's dangerous and silly".

The intervention, "there ***is*** a law against this", produced an extended period of manic laughter and a marked intensification of the earlier behaviour. 13 minutes into the session he suddenly said, "I'm full of shit". This triggered what seemed to be a major age regression and a period of stubborn silence. There followed a series of remarks like: "I won't, I won't! I won't use the potty … won't do anything … sit on it for hours … God's watching … no movements now … so full of shit … God won't like it … God's against this … God's disgusting … I feel really stupid … I can sit on it for hours feeling heavier and more full of shit … I'm sweating … cold, clammy and worried."

At Michel's suggestion, the session moved to the bathroom, where the regression could be built more effectively by sitting James on the toilet. Later feedback included the information that his feet did not touch the floor. It seemed also to anchor the age of the client in a period somewhat later than the potty training itself, to a child of about 3. The distress seemed clearly to be around a non-accepting self-consciousness which had generated an acute shame and discomfort about defecation. An immature spiritual idea (God as punitive judge and observer, rejecting bodily functions as dirty) reinforced the problem.

The period of learning and making connections about the session was twofold. On one level, it had been a conventional session about early childhood hurts and the construction on inhibition. At another level, it had given access to the time of life when potty training and the use of language had become established and influential in defining the self. Past and future had been separated from the present, parts of the body and its functions had become alienated from the person. An immature spiritual idea (God as punitive judge and observer, rejecting bodily functions as dirty) reinforced the problem.

The period of learning and making connections which concluded the session was twofold. At one level it had been a fairly conventional session about early childhood hurts and the construction inhibition. At another level, it had given access to the time of life when the client's egoic identity had been constructed, a time when potty training and the use of language had become established and influential in defining the self. Past and future had been separated from the present, parts of the body and its functions had become alienated from the person; an alienated divinity had appeared – external, anthropomorphic and punitive. Multiple boundaries had been created and given rise to an anxiously demarcated life.

Reflections on the work

James gave permission for his work to be discussed in the inquiry. His own feedback was that he felt lighter at the end of what was a significant discharge experience but had not experienced a full cathartic release. Even within the discharge, there had been a level of holding on. The work had not gone on long enough and the circumstances were artificial. He had been brought back into facilitator role too early. (This observation was confirmed by Evelyn.) However, he did feel he had accessed a fundamental level of distress around ego identity by a discharge means alone. There was a question about whether the build up of tension in the group meditation was due to the meditation itself or not. The session had mapped the territory by generating a significant age regression, though it had not resulted in a transformative experience. However, it did seem to establish something important about the proposition. He had not used the question, 'who am I?' For him, such a question came from the ego and sought an intellectual response. To have any chance of reaching an answer on an issue such as this, he felt that it was imperative to avoid asking the question.

Martin fed back as counsellor. He owned some difficulty in maintaining his free attention as he had expected a different kind of session – using the question, 'who am I?' and alternating discharge with meditation. He said that he had had some investment in that way of working. Once he had offered an intervention to steer the session in what he thought was the agreed way, but this had been properly ignored by James as a client-in-charge. Only late on had he seen where James was really coming from. Michele had felt responsible for holding James safely through the process. At times her free attention had wavered – she had been with the client, but sometimes also wondering what she would do in the client position, before returning to a more centred holding. She had recognised that work on physical functions like vomiting and defecation presented, in social terms, a major challenge to the dignity of the ego. She also felt that the wider symbolism of the work was very great and that she as still digesting it.

Evelyn had shared Martin's surprise at the direction of the work but had trusted the process. She had been moved by the completeness of the regression and suggested to James that he was still partly within it. At first, the work had not seemed to fit the criteria of the inquiry. Later, it was obvious. Jet, Alan and Michael each found it natural that work on development of the ego should generate the vintage of the material that came up. Jet thought that it was a successful way of testing the proposition. Michael wondered whether a meditation period during the process might have accelerated it. Alan said that he had seen the client's face change from one age to another and thought that the work had had "an odd kind of power". Several people said that James had in some sense been representing the group in his session. Suniiti did not comment.

The proposition had been that

A complementary process of co-counselling discharge and meditation/contemplation is a way to access a fundamental distress around identity/ego.

The session had shown that discharge work could do this on its own. It had not shown what role meditation could play, and it had not looked at the ultimate benefits – the experience of 'abundant time', for example, which had been in the mind of the group when the issue was first discussed. It seems to me that this session was a valid exercise in psycho-archaeology which taught me something about the construction on my identity and contributed to answering the question posed by the inquiry group. True regression (and I am sure both personally and through feedback that the experience was a true regression) is in many ways a liberating and even enjoyable experience. In an investigatory sense it always works for me. It generates shifts in the way I perceive myself and relativises my self-concept: through the consciousness of making such shifts I am made aware that my personal identity is necessarily provisional – a lesson which, in a different way, is also learned through meditation. In terms of the proposition used in the inquiry, which is about access and understanding, the session was a clear co-counselling success.

What is less sure was whether it was the kind of therapeutic or healing process normally understood by co-counsellors. In the longer term (I am writing 6 months after the event) I cannot say that I have noticed any significant change in my way of being me a result of the session. This may be because the process was incomplete or it may be because it was of a kind that, by itself, could change the distress in the situation successfully accessed. Would a completer, more intensive session, the use of meditation or of methodologies from other therapies have been more effective? The inquiry was not able to pursue these issues. The session supported the proposition s narrowly formulated for the inquiry but leaves other important questions unanswered.

The session lasted for approximately 50 minutes and the inquiry's review took 32. On completion of this task, the group began the process of winding down towards closure. In their individual feedback from the day, a number of people shared the view that the group had covered considerable ground in a short time. Some added that they felt clearer about the concepts explored and would be revising their own practice. One participant, Suniiti, said that the process had helped her to the conclusion that co-counselling was no longer for her.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE QUESTION OF VALIDITY

The inherited model

In his consideration of validity in co-operative inquiry, John Heron's key test (Heron 1988) is that the conclusions of such an inquiry should be well-founded on the experiences of the co-researchers as co-subjects. But what does this mean? Experience, to Heron, is not reality, but a way of construing reality and giving meaning to its context. "So the 'real' world is already construed by us. We can never get outside our constructs to find out whether our statement corresponds to it" (Heron 1988, 41). He goes on to suggest that there are 2 ways of construing. The first he calls 'propositional construing'. This we experience them in terms of the concepts and categories that come with our mastery of language. The second he calls 'presentational construing' adding that we share it with pre-linguistic children and with animals. Here, "we construe immediate appearances in terms of spatio-temporal wholes, distinct processes and presences" (Heron 1988, 41).

Thus to have an experience is to construe its content by one of 2 means and, Heron goes on to say, research statements founded on experience are ones that cohere with these 2 ways of making sense. To this extent, Heron's theory of knowledge is compatible with the view of Stanislav Grof (Grof 1985) discussed in Chapter 3 – that the map is not the territory – with the addition of some specific ideas about the process of map-making. Heron is endorsing the view that we cannot be crudely empiricist.

But then he makes a significant shift in language and I think also in meaning, through an idiosyncratic use of the term 'worlds'. Initially, he identifies 3 such worlds: the researched world (created by the researchers' explicit, formal statements), the posited world (created through the process of propositional construction) and the presented world (created through the process of presentational construction). To Heron, the presented world is in an important sense the experiential touchstone for both of the other worlds. It is "the content of that extra-linguistic construing which tells us that some particular conceptual framework that comes from our language, culture and research, is inappropriate for a certain experience" (Heron 1988, 42). There seems to me to a Romantic suggestion that an apprehension that is direct and unspoiled by sophistication is somehow truer than any other kind, more to be trusted. Heron himself uses the word 'authentic'. The map may not be the territory, but there is a territory and we can know as a fact that some kinds of map are better than others – with the more primitive taking precedence.

Heron does admit that even the presented world is shifting and variable. He asks how we can know that its constructs are authentic. His suggested answer is: "I think there authenticity is confirmed through agreement in action and use. We know the presented world is a world, that we have co-created a working viable version of it, when we can act and interact concertedly within it … so now we have a fourth world, a world-of-action, established through the coherence of concerted deeds … in a co-operative inquiry the propositional knowledge is asserted by the research conclusions is coherent with the experiential knowledge of the researchers as co-subjects, and their experiential knowledge is coherent with their practical knowledge in knowing how to act together in their researched world" (Heron 1988, 42).

The use of 'world' has the effect of making everything concrete. It helps to make plausible the suggestion that the learning from shared experience, generated by the successful sharing of experience itself, can be called 'real' – to the point of returning an almost traditional concept of objectivity to our idea of knowledge, at least in the context of co-operative inquiry.

Some of the language used elsewhere in Heron's consideration of validity supports the above suggestion. Inquiries need "findings". Inquirers need "falsification procedures"; they need to have a way of noticing "corrective data". Moreover, not all experiences of shared reality are to be trusted. "There is not only individual nescience to be taken into account. There is also collective consensus collusion. When this occurs inquirers are all tacitly agreeing to choose a pseudo-reality. They collude in not noticing, or if they notice in not mentioning, aspects of their experience that show up the limitations of their conceptual mode" (Heron 1988, 51).

Problems of this kind are raised in the context of 'testing'. Heron's concept of co-operative inquiry, as I have shown, is based on a research cycle which involves agreeing a proposition, testing it experientially, and reviewing the proposition in the light of the experience. It is perhaps the idea of testing and (for me) the associations of the word itself that anchor the whole enterprise back into the world of empirical research. The test is a form of experiment, albeit a rather loose one. Heron himself sees some of the problems here. If a group of people arrives at an idea it wants to test, it will already have some investment in the idea. If the test is carried out, group members will have lived the idea, and idea that will have defined the experience itself. This makes it very likely that they may fail to identify “corrective data”.

Under these circumstances it is difficult to see how any co-operative inquiry could present its findings with real confidence. Heron makes a number of specific suggestions about inquiry group management and also introduces the idea of ‘bracketing’, a competence intended to prevent the validation of the research from being self-fulfilling and circular. “When I am immersed in the experience phase, I bracket of the research ideas that pick out that experience … I attend to the pure morphology of … (the) … content: the form, process and presence that I grasp by my presentational construing” (Heron 1988, 59). Nevertheless it seems to me that this underlying approach to the inquiry process and its outcome is flawed: it seeks to establish an implausibly objectified form of validity.

The unfolding process

What the February 1993 inquiry discovered was a need to use the whole experience of the participants and to give up the idea of its propositions as potential findings to be verified – in other words, to abandon the experimental model. It is fair to say that the model of proposition-test-review with which the group began was more empirical and reductionist than that advocated by John Heron. In a sense we misunderstood what he actually says in his discussion of validity. But the idea of the cycle, and especially the word ‘test’, automatically led the group down an empiricist path. It is after all a familiar one, whereas John Heron’s suggestion about collective agreement as validating the construing (and therefore in a sense creation?) of ‘worlds’ is not. In any case I do not think that this conceptual distinction, although philosophically important, would have made much difference to the methods of the inquiry on the first day. Heron’s approach itself retains the sense of a truth to be revealed, a specific, distinctive reality waiting to be encountered.

I have already shown the influence of a reductionist approach on the early part of the inquiry. It contributed to the decisions not to use the group dynamics or introduce CCI Community issues into the inquiry. When the subject for free attention was selected for consideration on Saturday morning, care was taken to avoid ‘grandiose’ propositions which could not be tested properly. I believe that the potential loss here is demonstrated by the quality of the discussion on ‘free attention’ which took place before the proposition was agreed. In retrospect, it seems richer than the material that came out of the experiential phase. The questionnaire material, too, reveals how well group members could articulate their reflected experience of co-counselling when prompted by open and permission-giving rather than closed and narrow questions.

The Saturday group went beyond Heron by making a subject/observer split between group members in the experiential cycle. However, despite the mannerisms of ‘rigour’, there was some confusion about what was being learned and recognition, that if the activity was an experiment, its findings needed to be treated with caution, since the research design was poor at controlling variables. One way of spending Sunday would have been to look at free attention more rigorously. At the same time it is important not to be overly critical. Many people in the group felt that they had gained important new insights into free attention. The day changed the way in which free attention was taught on a Fundamentals a few weeks after the inquiry weekend. A number of individuals decided to combine short free attention mini-sessions in their co-counselling practice with periods of shared meditation and mutual free attention. The importance of free attention and its quality both within and outside co-counselling settings was validated.

It was during this time that the research model was explicitly challenged. The first experience had been a test of discharge in short sessions. Everyone had been involved and most people reported specific changes of state when the work was completed. To this extent, the process still had a somewhat reductive and experimental flavour. Then in the review stage of the cycle the concept of ‘maintenance discharge’ was generated by a member of the group, swiftly internalised and adopted by many of the other participants, and discussed at length. Here, the official proposition about coming back into present time (and some conceptual difficulties about the idea of ‘present time’) lost its place as the centre of attention. The group’s energy and attention were held by the ‘maintenance discharge’ theme, with its implied comment on the limitations of co-counselling as a developmental method. The process was loosening. But it was only when the problem of co-counselling and ego states was raised that the idea of testing propositions in an experimental way became unsupportable. At the same time, discussion itself began to be validated as an inquiry method.

“I was struck, I don’t know if we were aware of it, we’re doing a lot of discussion but it seems to be flowing so well” (Michele).

This was initially resisted by James as facilitator:

“I’m wondering, as we finish this discussion, I start to believe that we’re moving away from doing the inquiry … that what we’re trying to do now, as I understand in the terms of the inquiry, is all food for the inquiry, what help it is to formulate a proposition that we can investigate”.

This intervention brought the problem to a head. Participants knew what they wanted to look at, but found it very hard to think of a proposition appropriate to the inquiry model – though they no longer suppressed their own desire with self-mocking terms like ‘grandiose’.

Evelyn: “I’m having trouble with the words for this … I get lost half-way into it and lose the concepts”.

Martin: “Yes, I do”.

Michael: “My thought on this is that this is such a profound proposition whether we can actually test it … “

Jet: “Yes”.

There is then another facilitator intervention which surprised me s much as anybody else, and seemed to come through from nowhere, though it must have been quietly gestating in some corner of my mind.

James: "I've got a notion about that. I think that this isn't an orthodox co-operative inquiry. Co-operative inquiry, although it's 'new paradigm', still has residues of scientism, and it comes into me with a slightly distressed notion of rigour. Having to be able to isolate something and test it and prove it, to me, I know we're trying to work within some sort of inquiry framework, but what I'm trying to do in terms of the research is something called, I think I'm trying to do something called hermeneutics … which is …"

Michael: "He's got another agenda!"

James: "Really! It is! People who've got some experience come together and share it by disciplined reflection on our own subjective experience; we build a map of the territory. We don't attempt to say this is right and this is wrong, we leave that to people who want to prove their case … or who want to believe they're right. We're saying that there's no scientific law to be gained out of this … what we have is our mutuality of experience and to some degree a common language and culture, but different experiences … This I think is a better way of doing it: drop the scientific pretensions because we just get stuck with bits of language. 'What does discharge mean?' I don't really care. What I do care about is what it means to Michael and Martin and Suniiti and Evelyn and Michel and Alan and Jet and James meeting together on a particular weekend … so it's much more relative and … intimate and biographical and subjective. And I think that's the way to do it, otherwise we, you know, things that have to be tested have to be chunked down so much they're hardly worth testing."

Suniiti: "I agree."

Martin: "We need biofeedback machines strapped to us."

James: "Yes, that's right. So I hadn't really, I knew I was pushing towards that but I hadn't understood it till now, that this is a mutation of what is understood by co-operative inquiry, really."

Alan: "So it's a bit like the old story of the 4 blind men and the elephant."

Michael: “Very similar.”

Jet: “that just finishes it off.”

James: “So it’s much looser, to be about something.”

Evelyn: “What I’m getting about what we’re doing is that this has more of a transformational element in it than the records of earlier co-operative inquiries that I’ve read that seemed to me to be so very stilted and stuck.”

James: “Yes.”

Evelyn: “And I’m kind of thrilled about what’s happening.”

James: “I mean, I still quite like the idea of a proposition to work with, but we’re not going to prove whether it’s right or wrong …”

Evelyn: “But it brings it into more focus …”

Martin: “Makes it clearer … “

James: “Right, to try and get some form of words and may be to have it s the afternoon’s business, and to have the technique for exploring it, not testing … “

I quote this at length with some discomfort. There is a clearly manic element in the tone of the discussion, a discussion which has become very facilitator led. When I introduce the idea of hermeneutics, one which is unfamiliar to the rest of the group and has not even been mentioned in advance, I talk about my personal intentions for the research, making a distinction between the inquiry, which is co-operative, and the research as a whole, which is my personal project and responsibility. This provokes a half-humorous challenge – “he’s got another agenda!” – from Michael. There is after all a tradition, especially within social psychology, of researchers deceiving subjects about their true intentions.

Yet the idea of hermeneutics was not something which I had been holding up my sleeve. It didn't mature until I voiced it, and I believe that it was something which the group process itself was pushing towards. Amidst all the jocularity of that time, it was very well received. In terms of tasks, it enabled the formulation of a proposition that could be worked with, given a revised understanding of what the project was about. And although the mood of the afternoon was different from that of the morning, much lower key and hesitant, the work decided upon during the morning was, in essence, carried out. At the same time the discussion did reveal what is also a truth: the February 1993 inquiry was a subset of a research process. The process as a whole began with a set of questionnaires which both helped the inquiry group to get started and provided an independent body of evidence to me as initiating researcher. It ended, not with the group's own conclusions, but with a personal reflection on the whole process by me using a wider conceptual framework than that deployed during the inquiry itself. Clearly this was a different enterprise to one in which the co-operative inquiry constitutes the whole of the research.

Criteria and experience

John Heron says that the meaning of validity in co-operative inquiry is that its conclusions are well-founded on the experience of the co-researchers as co-subjects (Heron 1988). To this extent I am willing to accept his approach in considering the validity of the February 1993 inquiry. In a modified form I accept it for my own research, where my formulation would be:

That its conclusions are well-founded on the experience of all its subjects, including the primary researcher, thereby meeting the criteria of 'critical subjectivity'.

For the research as a whole, I would adopt 3 of the criteria listed in Chapter 3 above:

1. Acknowledge the provisional and relative nature of 'reality' in human experience. At the same time strive to recognise and thereby create in that experience elements of pattern and form.
2. Retain the idea of a critical and public knowledge, generated through the disciplines of self-reflexivity and hermeneutic exchange. Within co-operative

inquiry specifically, this discipline is reinforced by a proposition-experience-review cycle built into the response

3. Honour feelings and intuition (or 'right brain' activity as some people call it) and allow people to reflect on and tell their own stories.

The key distinction between this approach and Heron's is the much more provisional nature of the claims which are made. The process of recognition and creation carried out by the researchers concerns "elements of underlying pattern and form" rather than actual "worlds", whether in the form of a "researcher world" or a "world-of-action". A similar distinction is made by Stanislav Grof, when he says:

"The conceptual conflict between mechanistic science and the modern revolutionary developments represents a replica of the major conflict between major schools of Greek philosophy. The Ionic school – Thales of Miletos, Anaximenes, Anaximandros and others – considered the basic philosophical question to be 'what is the world made of? What is its basic substance?' In contrast, Plato and Pythagoras believed that the critical issue is its form, patterning and order. Modern science is distinctly neo-Platonic and neo-Pythagorean" (Grof 1985, 15).

The search for pattern rather than reality may be a more modest one. But the discipline it demands, that of a finely developed personal and collective self-reflexivity, allows for flexible and creative working. It frees research participants from the kind of tunnel vision imposed both by empiricism and the construction of a defined "world-in-action". The forms of knowledge produced may not be definitive, but hey have been generated by co-creators with the freedom to breathe.

How well does this piece of research meet those tests?

The inquiry acknowledged the provisional and relative nature of 'reality' when it began to encounter complex and difficult issues – what does discharge really mean? Does it always mean the same thing? How do we recognise different significances in discharge – do the observed somatic manifestations in themselves provide sufficient guidance? What is the nature of 'ego'? Is our core sense of identity based on distress? - or on illusion? Are distress and epistemological error related at this level? The group, whilst realising that it could no longer strive for objectivity, nonetheless continued a search for mutual understanding and some measure of consensus, and based on the experience of its members. It continued the project of devising ways of exploring this level of question through an experiential exploration and review. We were not saying: “all is relative; any answer is as valid as any other; there’s no point in asking the questions”. The group used all its resources to engage with and reflect on the issues. It sought to recognise and thereby create elements of underlying pattern and form.

Hence the group was also retaining the idea of critical and public knowledge. Its discussions became, at times, a model of hermeneutic exchange. It did retain the cycle of proposition-test-review, now consciously reframed as proposition-experience-review. The process did allow for the expression of feelings, especially during the experiential phases of the second day. The periods of free discussion and for the research as a whole, the questionnaire responses, gave a certain amount of space for the play of intuitive insight. In terms of these criteria the inquiry was an overall success, showing the capacity to be self-correcting after a period in which it had narrowed its horizons.

For the co-operative inquiry weekend itself, 3 additional criteria were suggested:

1. Avoid reductionism by using the lived experience of the whole person in the research, including their own capacity for self-determination
2. Avoid scientific rituals and mannerisms which appear objective whilst neglecting to question their own fundamental assumptions
3. Generate an open and democratic relationship between the researchers and subjects, making subject co-researchers and researchers co-subjects.

On the first point, the participants drew on their reflected experience during discussion periods and used their co-counselling skills during the experiential phases; free attention, catharsis, counselling skills and meditation were practised during the inquiry. Games, rituals and some interpersonal work were used to sustain the inquiry process. The propositions and exercises were generated by the group as a whole with very little facilitator input, although the ultimate parameters of the inquiry had been set by the primary researcher.

On the second point, I have already discussed the way in which scientific mannerisms did influence the early stages of the inquiry weekend in a reductive way. We were not at that stage clear enough about the kinds of knowledge were being sought. What we gained from our mistake was the opportunity to learn from it and embark on our own corrective process.

On the third point the relationships within the group were very open and I succeeded fully in becoming a co-subject. But I am not sure whether the other participants fully became co-researchers. It is true that the weekend's activities and the conclusions drawn from them were a collective product. But participants were aware that for me there was another, personal dimension to the research and I did retain the role of group facilitator. The relationship was not therefore fully democratic.

Overall I believe that the research methodology meets the demands of critical subjectivity. It does employ the hermeneutic methods employed by Ken Wilber and L. C. Knights (see Chapter 3 above) for interpreting *Macbeth.* And, in relation to this tradition, there is one important innovation. Wilber talks about 'intersubjective discussion' and Knights about 'qualified readers'. The research under scrutiny has indeed involved discussion, reading and writing. But it has also involved acting and directing. It has included changes of role, and it has involved the drama of the participant-researchers' own lives. To that extent it can be said to have added another dimension to the recommended process of hermeneutic exchange. The approach engaged the critical subjectivity of the inquiry group at the level of the whole person rather than exclusively at the level of mental consciousness and intellectual discrimination. Through the inquiry cycle of proposition-experience-review, in however modified a fashion, the research found a way of grounding itself in lived experience. It thereby avoided the reductionism of traditional science and the reification of the Heron approach – and also the flight into abstraction often characteristic of wholly cognitive and verbal endeavours.

CHAPTER EIGHT: OVERVIEW

Conclusions from the inquiry process

The 12 participants in the inquiry process had a total of 121 years of co-counselling experience in CCI settings, an average of just over 10 years each. Within this, the range of experience was very great. It ranged from Anne, with 14 years in CCI and 5 years in RC prior to that, who continues to give discharge and re-evaluation pride of place in her personal development work, to Suniiti, whose personal outcome from the inquiry was to leave CCI after 2 years. However, despite this considerable variation, a number of conclusions seem to emerge, each of which would be supported by most of the participants in the research.

Firstly, co-counselling had been a transformative experience for almost everyone in the group. They became different people as a result of their involvement with co-counselling. Participants in the research reported that their ordinary experience of the world, their practices, values and beliefs underwent a permanent shift as a result as a result of the co-counselling process. The essential changes were experienced as emancipatory and empowering. To this extent, co-counselling was vindicated as a significantly beneficial personal development method.

Secondly, co-counselling was not a complete system of personal development for anybody in the group. Given that the group was partly recruited for its experience of other ways of working, this is hardly a surprising conclusion. It is nevertheless interesting that 9 of the 12 participants took up their other work after co-counselling because of developmental needs which co-counselling itself was not unable to meet. For 2 of these 9 people, the new work was in other forms of counselling and therapy. For another 2 it was the practice of meditation. For the other 5 it included both. Of the 3 people whose other work began before they started co-counselling, 2 were on spiritual paths that included the practice of meditation and the other was involved in bodywork. None of these activities was abandoned in favour of co-counselling and in one case co-counselling failed to integrate itself into the spiritual practice and was given up.

Thirdly, all of the participants valued the peer principle within co-counselling practice, the reciprocal exchange within the co-counselling dyad with clients in charge of their sessions supported by counsellors whose main job is to give them free attention, co-counselling's version of unconditional personal regard. There was more difficulty with the practice of the peer principle in the development of the Community as a whole. This was seen as not working well in CCI at the time of the research (1993). But there was no suggestion that the idea of an autonomous self-managing community was a bad one. The complaint was that it was undeveloped and that issues about leadership and decision making needed to be addressed more consciously and intentionally. In this respect the problem was perceived to be a limitation in the way in which the peer principle was actualised, not in the principle itself.

Fourthly, the idea of free attention was seen as having wider implications than its technical value in the counselling role. It raises a number of questions both about states of consciousness and states of relationship. The inquiry group chose to spend a day exploring it in a quasi-experimental fashion and ended by agreeing that free attention could take a variety of forms, any of which could be an empowering experience for the recipient. There seemed to be a clear link with other concept like rapport in NLP practice, and mindfulness as understood in certain forms of (largely Buddhist inspired) meditation. The free attention idea was seen as something very precious within co-counselling and also as an element of the co-counselling tradition which could be independently usable to beneficial effect. In relation to the practice of co-counselling itself, the inquiry group agreed that the preparation for paired and group work would benefit from short periods of meditation and mutual free attention.

Fifthly, the central mechanism of the co-counselling tradition, the discharge and re-evaluation process, was the focus of considerable thought, both in the completed questionnaire responses and within the inquiry weekend. This process had a mixed report. The ability to discharge was valued. It was seen as a way of achieving an emotional release in a context of respectful attention and of making cognitive links with what it is that has been released. As such it was seen as contradicting the kind of cultural incompetence that teaches people to fear and repress emotional expression and to deny its worth and transformative power when such expression occurs. It was understood as a way of becoming emotionally literate.

What many people in the group questioned was the continuing long term practice of the discharge and re-evaluation process once this lesson has been learned and practised over a period of time. Once feelings have been reintegrated into the psyche and some major work on personal distress patterns repeated, does the method retain its full value? The belief of most participants in the research was that it does not and that it tends to become subject to a law of diminishing returns. Moe specifically, group members suggested that discharge can become the source of an addiction to a somatic buzz, or of an attachment to the very distress which it is intended to lead the co-counselling practitioner away from, thereby losing its effectiveness as a vehicle for change. 7 of the 8 people who had been involved in co-counselling for 10 years or more reported this problem. The exception is Anne, the longest serving co-counsellor, who found that discharge and re-evaluation work had retained its full value, although she herself had added meditation to her personal development programme as a complementary practice. Other people overcame this perceived limitation of co-counselling in different ways. Some reduced their commitment to the process and placed more emphasis on other activities – either within the Community, which does provide space for like-minded co-counsellors to work in other ways, or elsewhere. For other people, like Sue and Rea, the emphasis was more on integrating the lessons of co-counselling into a successor activity.

The inquiry group's experiential exploration of discharge took particular note of 2 kinds. The first was 'maintenance discharge', with a specific value for emotional house-cleaning, whose focusing and energising quality was demonstrated on Sunday morning. This was seen as a valuable resource in personal management, carrying a state-altering potential in the short term, but not as a transformative or developmental experience. The second was the kind of major, spontaneous catharsis that can be triggered by conditions of acute personal distress. This was not seen as something that could be called to order in a session or necessarily bound by a co-counselling contract. Nonetheless co-counsellors would, because of their training and relative confidence in working with discharge, be able to recognise, value, manage and learn from such experiences rather than seeking to interrupt them through ignorance and fear.

The sixth conclusion of the research concerns the relationship between co-counselling work and the 'egoic' mode of consciousness. 2 people believed that co-counselling commonly has the effect of building up the ego and its preoccupations in a way that runs counter to the desirable course of human development. But they also suggested that it had the potential to work beneficially, by challenging the ego as a limiting self-construct and thereby opening a path to transpersonal illumination. Some people thought that this might be accomplished through discharge work alone. Others believed that it might best be approached through a mix of discharge work and meditation. The central idea accepted by the group in this discussion was that people forge their identity in early childhood in a context of distress, some of this being inevitable to the process and some being imposed externally. Personal identity thereby becomes narrowly ego-bound and defended, both repressing the body and feelings and denying the potential for transcendence. The experiential work that was undertaken on Sunday afternoon gave support to this idea, and to the capacity of regression work to uncover this layer of distorted personal development. However, the discharge work was incomplete, being more than the usual maintenance discharge and less than a cathartic transformation. Meditation was not used.

The seventh and final conclusion about the research as a whole is about the loss to CCI brought about by its lack of any scope for theory revision. CCI has inherited RC theory and, having added a few additional ideas during its first days as a separate Community, is now (1993) theoretically static. This has been the case since at least 1979, when I first joined. Community members have permission to work in other ways when they contract to do so, but this does not feed back into the formal theoretical position of the organisation, or influence the way in which co-counselling is taught, since everyone needs to be introduced to CCI co-counselling through the same core curriculum. In particular there is no platform from which to launch a critique of the total commitment to a discharge and re-evaluation approach to the work. There is no institutional forum even for a discussion, since there are no appropriate institutions. The experience of people who grow beyond this model as their predominant way of working cannot be recognised or validated. This remains the case even though significant works within CCI's small literature (Heron 1977 & 1982) invite consideration of 'transmutative' work based around meditation, the commonest of the alternative methods practised by participants in the research, and one which played a central part in the inquiry. My own suggestion is that the experience of my research as a whole strongly indicates that CCI co-counselling is significantly impoverished as a developmental method by the Community's inability to develop theory in any recognised collective way.

Final thoughts on radical humanism

In Chapter 2 above, I placed co-counselling within the 'radical humanist' position on Ray Holland's paradigm map (Holland 1990) which sets out to delineate theoretical perspectives on mental health. In terms of mental health promotion specifically, Holland summarises the radical humanist position as follows: "Understanding social responses reveals ecological and personal exploitation. By example and persuasion, raise consciousness, urge outcry, discredit false authority and disabling professions, encourage self-help and emotional literacy" (Holland 1990). CCI is clearly a self-help enterprise designed to promote emotional literacy. It teaches that disabling states of distress are the social norm in existing human cultures. These are reproduced through child-rearing practices, institutions and systems of exchange which interrupt a self-actualising potential inherent in the human psyche. Endemic distress distortion gives rise to patterns of inhibition and compulsion at the level of the individual and of dominance and submission at the level of the collective. This latter in turn supports systemic oppression within human societies and a disastrously instrumental relationship to the world in which we live. The project of co-counselling is to create a therapeutic method which will challenge these patterns and a peer community which can provide space for people to interact in conditions favourable to an emancipated maturity. The inquiry underpinning the present work is a tentative demonstration that the actually existing CCI, as assessed by a group of committed practitioners/members, is successful in some resects and not in others.

The more successful energies of CCI, in the view of most research participants, seemed to be in individual work rather than the collective life of the Community. If CCI is a radical humanist movement, where is its radicalism? The simple answer is that it retains radical beliefs. In particular, it sees the peer principle as fundamental both to the counselling process and to the development of the Community. Moreover the understanding of 'distress' and what needs to be done about it has an essential radicalism. Co-counsellors work on distresses within the psyche from the perspective that these flow as much from the success of our original socialisation as from its failure.

There is a more complex answer to the question of CCI's radicalism, which I think has 2 elements. The first involves the admission that there has been a real falling away from radicalism at the level of external politics. The ideas behind CCI were developed in the 1940's, 1950's and 1960's. But CCI as a movement is the product of the last 20 years (1974-1993) and shares their history. Within this period, activities such as counselling and the exploration of personal, group and organisational dynamics have become widely acceptable in a number of personal and professional settings. One progressive service which co-counselling does provide is to offer access to this world very cheaply, with steep sliding scales for Fundamentals courses and Community membership. So the success of CCI in providing a forum for humanistic work has to some extent occurred in favourable social conditions – at least for the population groups from which CCI members are predominantly drawn, educated and culturally middle-class albeit with a wide range of financial circumstances.

On the wider political stage there has by contrast been a dramatic shift to a more individualistic, less communitarian and less socially responsible ideology and practice whilst at the same time institutions have become less participative and more authoritarian. At the level of political journalism and public discourse the word 'radical' has itself undergone a bizarre reversal of meaning, denoting roughly what the term 'reactionary' was used to describe 20 years ago. And although very few co-counsellors will have supported this change in political culture, they have not been immune to its influence. In a climate where personal development in is some sense rewarded and collective efforts are blocked off or punished, it is not surprising to discover that co-counsellors are better at therapy than they are at community building.

However there is also a more positive side to the introspective mood of CCI co-counsellors in the current historical phase. This lies in the opportunity to revisit the roots of the political problem in another way, and to ask what kind of human could actually bear to be liberated from external oppression and internal repression. How could we cope without our personal dramas of dominance, submission and rebellion? One answer, offered by Ken Wilber, draws out some political implications of the inquiry group's consideration of 'ego'. "Mankind will never … give up … murderous aggression, war, oppression and repression, attachment and exploitation, until men and women give up that property called personality. Until, that is, they wake up to the transpersonal.

Until that time guilt, murder, property and persons will always remain synonymous" (Wilber 1983, 286).

Wilber does see the human egoic consciousness as conferring many benefits: rational comprehension, formal operational thinking, self-reflexivity, the potential for mutual recognition and esteem, a discriminating and internalised morality and a legally recognised self-consciousness. But it is also a vulnerable construct, guilty in its emergence, open to anxiety and aware of its mortality. Such a combination of mental competence and terror leads to necessary distortions – competition, inequity and exploitation at the level of material and emotional-sexual relations, and a drive to rob others of equal recognition and esteem by forcing one's own ego to be number one, recognised above all others, cosmocentric and glorified. Social and political revolutions do not in and of themselves alter this fact. "The democratic ego and socialist ego are still egos, and egos by structure house the *tendency* and the *power* for exploitation, repression and oppression. As a frightening Czechoslovakian saying has it, 'in democracy man exploits man; in communism it's the other way round'" (Wilber 1983, 285).

There is a developmental project, central to transpersonal psychology and many of those spiritual movements based on experience rather than faith, and latent within the CCI inquiry group, which aims to create an experience of the world that is not ego-bound. To a Buddhist oriented individual like Wilber, the aim is to let go of personality. Others might prefer to talk about developing another kind of personhood. In John Heron's work there is the idea of the distress-free person living in 'abundant time'. In both cases the suggestion is that the distorted motivations of the egoic individual are replaced by more positive and co-operative ones because the fundamental fear and attachment which drives distorted desire has gone. Consequently the potential exists within an organisation like CCI to model a different way of living and also to support a different kind of political activism if it wished. Transpersonal development has the appearance of being other-worldly but it could also be at the heart of sane social change.

This is the piece that seems to be missing from Ray Holland's 'paradigm map', where radical humanism is seen somehow to be a less adequate and developed approach than radical structuralism. The latter focuses on those fundamental social and economic oppressions identified by the Marxist tradition and works, in however small a way, for revolutionary change. Radical structuralists do in my view have a clearer understanding of how societies and the systems of exchange within them work than do many radical humanists. They also tend to be more focused and realistic about the question of power. But there is little space to consider the subjective aspects of the revolutionary process. The tendency of history to repeat itself is consistently blamed on the corruption of parties, the strength of enemies and the betrayal of leaders. The idea that it might have something to do with the present nature of people is dismissed as reactionary.

It is true that people are better able to make changes under some conditions than others. I have already said that CCI processes seem to work better at the individual rather than the collective level, both within the organization and in the wider world. However CCI is also engaged in an encounter with ideas and practices that have a potential to lead to new ways of living at all levels. For those who believe that any sustained transformative change in the area that may be conventionally called 'mental health' requires a different way of sharing the world, the issue is not about choosing between the 2 forms of radical thinking suggested by Holland. Rather, it suggests a need to synthesise them, incorporating and transcending both. Otherwise there is the danger of one of the two distortions identified by John Heron in his own discussion of these questions.

"Two distortions can occur. A person may turn to personal growth as a way of avoiding the issues of social, political and economic change: we then have a warm, loving, authentic person, who is in some way parasitic on a repressive social system which she is in no way committed to change. She gives no thought to the big structures, to the issues involved in changing them, or to plans to change any social structures big or small. On the other hand, a person may turn to political radicalism in part as a way of dealing with repressed distress feelings: in this case revolutionary fervour may to a significant degree be the acting out of denied feelings, the chronic fears and angers of childhood interference. When such a revolutionary comes to power, we may expect to see the repression acted out in the classic form of an oppressive dictatorship on behalf of the masses" (Heon 1977, 56).

Radical humanism, in contrast to radical structuralism, places much of its emphasis on the personal, rather than the systemic, aspects of the political. Yet even when involved in an apparently rarefied debate on the nature of ‘ego’, it makes a potential contribution to political life. I cannot endorse the suggested evolutionary dynamic within Holland’s paradigm map, because the suggested ascent to radical structuralism involves the abandonment of important insights. I am also unable to see the 2 paradigms as fixed and irreconcilable. Paradigms and paradigm maps, like any other forms of human knowledge, are necessarily incomplete.

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